

Anthology of Russian Short Stories

FROM
CLASSICAL
TO MODERN

VOLUME
TWO

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MOSCOW

Collets

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MAXIM GORKY

(1868-1936)

Maxim Gorky who introduced the method of socialist realism in literature was the first Chairman of the Board of the USSR Writers' Union founded on his initiative. After the October 1917 Revolution Gorky lent his whole-hearted support to the Government's programme of mass cultural development and enlightenment. There is hardly a Soviet writer of the older generation who has not experienced the beneficial influence of Gorky's personality, whom Gorky has not helped by word and deed in the early and most difficult stages of his career when the budding author's uncertainty about the nature of his talent might have led him to unnecessary mistakes and waverings.

Gorky was the founder of many magazines and publishing houses (including Vsemirnaya Literatura Publishing House, which familia-

rized the Soviet reader with chefs d'oeuvre of world classics) and edited 13 literary journals.

Gorky was the world's first proletarian writer, who kept au courant of all the major political happenings in the world. He was one of the first to raise his voice in protest against fascism when in 1932 he published his article entitled: "On Whose Side Are You, Masters of Culture?" addressed to the world's intellectuals.

In Soviet times Gorky published his novel "Artamonov & Sons" (1925), the plays "Yegor Bulychyov and Others" (1932), "Dostigayev and Others" (1933), "Vassa Zheleznova" (1935), and the novel "The Life of Klim Samgin" (1936) presenting a wide panorama of life in Russia in the decades preceding the Revolution when the ideological and social struggle was inevitably coming to a head.

Vladimir Lenin is dead.

Even in the camp of his enemies there are some who honestly admit: in Lenin the world has lost a personality "who embodied genius more strikingly than any other great man of his day".

...That which I wrote about him soon after his death was written in a state of depression, hastily and poorly. There were some things tact would not allow me to mention; and I hope this will be fully understood. This man was far-seeing and wise, and "in great wisdom there is also great sorrow".

He saw far ahead, and when thinking and speaking of people in 1919-1921 he often accurately foretold what they would be like a few years hence. One did not always want to believe in his prophecies, for they were not infrequently discouraging, but alas many of them came to fit his sceptical characterizations. My recollections of him, in addition to being poorly written, lacked sequence and had some regrettable gaps. I should have begun with the London Congress, with the days when Vladimir Ilyich appeared before me clearly illumined by the doubt and mistrust of some, and the obvious hostility and even hatred of others.

I can still see the bare walls of the ridiculously shabby wooden church in the suburbs of London, the lancet windows of a small narrow hall much like the classroom of a poor school. It was only from the outside that the building resembled a church. Inside there was a total absence of any religious attributes and even the low pulpit stood not in the back of the hall but squarely between the two doors.

I had never met Lenin until that year, nor even read him as much as I should have done. I was strongly drawn to him, however, by what I had read of his writings, and particularly by the enthusiastic accounts of people who were personally acquainted with him. When we were introduced he gripped my hand firmly, probed me with his penetrating eyes, and said in the humorous tone of an old friend:

"I'm glad you came. You like a fight, don't you? Well, there's going to be a big scrap here."

I had pictured him differently. I missed something in him. He had this articulation with the slurred *r*'s, and a way of tucking his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waist-coat, which gave him a cocky sort of air. He was too ordinary, there was nothing of "the leader" in him. I am a writer and my job is to take note of details. This has become a habit, sometimes an annoying one.

When I had been presented to G.V. Plekhanov, he stood eyeing me sternly with folded arms, with the somewhat bored expression of a weary teacher looking at yet another new disciple. And he said the most conventional thing: "I'm an admirer of your talent." Apart from this he said nothing my memory could cling to. Throughout the Congress neither he nor I had the slightest desire to have a "heart to heart" chat.

Now, the bald, *r*-slurring, strong, thick-set man who kept rubbing his Socratic brow with one hand and pumping my hand with the other began to talk at once, with a kind twinkle in his amazingly alert eyes, of the shortcomings of my book *Mother* which he had, it appeared, read in the manuscript borrowed from I.P. Ladyzhnikov. I told him I had been in a hurry to write the book, but before I could explain why, Lenin nodded and himself gave the reason: it was a good thing that I had hurried because that was a much needed book. Many workers had joined the revolutionary movement impulsively, spontaneously, and would now find reading *Mother* very useful.

"A very timely book! " That was all the praise he gave me, but it was extremely valuable to me. After that he asked in a business-like tone whether *Mother* had been translated into any other languages and how much damage

had the Russian and American censors inflicted. When I told him that the author was to be prosecuted, he frowned, then threw back his head, closed his eyes, and gave a burst of amazing laughter...

Vladimir Ilyich hurriedly mounted the rostrum. His slurred r's made him seem a poor speaker, but within a minute I was as completely engrossed as everyone else. I had never known one could talk of the most intricate political questions so simply. This speaker was no coiner of fine phrases, he presented each word on the palm of his hand, as it were, disclosing its precise meaning with astonishing ease. The extraordinary impression he created is very hard to describe.

With his hand extended and slightly raised, he seemed to be weighing every word, sifting the phrases of his adversaries, and putting forward weighty arguments proving that it was the right and the duty of the working class to travel its own path, not in the rear or even abreast of the liberal bourgeoisie. It was all most extraordinary, and the impression was that he was speaking really at the bidding of history and not just from himself. The compactness, frankness, and force of his speech, everything about him as he stood on the rostrum was a work of classical art. There was nothing superfluous, no embellishments, and if there were any they could not be seen for his figures of speech were as natural and indispensable as a pair of eyes to a face, or five fingers to a hand.

He spoke less than those before him, but the impression was far greater. I was not the only one to feel this, for behind me I heard admiring whispers:

"That was neatly put! "

And so it was, for his every argument developed naturally backed by its own inner strength.

The Mensheviks did not hesitate to show that they found Lenin's speech unpleasant and his person even more so. The more convincingly he proved the Party's need to rise to the heights of revolutionary theory in order to put practice to a thorough test, the more viciously they interrupted his speech:

"This congress is no place for philosophizing! "

"Don't try to teach us! We're not schoolboys! "

The worst of these hecklers was a big, bearded fellow with the face of a shopkeeper. Bouncing from his seat he shouted, stuttering:

"Con-s-spirators... Cons-s-spiracy i-is y-your g-game! B-blankists! "

Rosa Luxemburg nodded approval of Lenin's words, and at one of the later sessions she told off the Mensheviks:

"You don't stand on Marxist positions, you sit on them, even loll on them."

A hot, angry gust of irritation, irony, and hatred swept the hall. Hundreds of eyes were fixed upon Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, seeing him in different lights. The hostile sallies did not seem to perturb him, he spoke clearly and he was not ruffled. What this outward composure cost him I was to learn a few days later. It was both strange and painful to see that this hostility was prompted by the self-evident truth that it was only from the heights of theory that the Party could clearly see the causes of its differences. I had the growing impression that every day of the Congress gave Vladimir Ilyich more and more strength and made him more certain of himself; with every day his speeches gained in firmness, and the entire Bolshevik section of the Congress evidenced a more resolute frame of mind. I was moved almost as much by Rosa Luxemburg's splendid, trenchant speech against the Mensheviks.

Lenin spent all his free time among the workers, questioning them about the smallest details of their existence.

"What about the women? The drudgery of housework? Have they time to study or read?"

In Hyde Park several workers who had never seen Lenin before the Congress exchanged their impressions. Characteristically, one of them remarked:

"I don't know... Perhaps the workers here in Europe do have someone as clever as he—Bebel or someone like that. But I don't believe there is another whom I'd like as I liked this one, at first sight! "

To which another added, smiling:

"He's one of us! "

"So is Plekhanov! " someone objected.

"Plekhanov is our teacher, our boss, but Lenin is our comrade and leader!" came the apt retort.

"That frock-coat of Plekhanov's getting a bit too tight for him," remarked a young chap slyly.

Once, on his way to a restaurant Vladimir Ilyich was approached by a worker Menshevik who wanted to ask him about something. Lenin slowed his step, falling behind the rest of his party, and reached the restaurant some five minutes later.

"It's strange that such a naïve chap should happen to be at the Party Congress!" he said with a frown. "He wanted to know the real reason for our disagreements. 'Well,' I said, 'your comrades want to sit in parliament, while we think the working class must prepare for battle.' I think he understood me..."

We were a small group dining as always in the same cheap little restaurant. Vladimir Ilyich, I noticed, ate little: two or three eggs with a slice of bacon, and a mug of thick, dark beer. He obviously did not worry about himself although his solicitude for the workers was amazing. M.F. Andreyeva was responsible for feeding them and he kept asking her:

"Think our comrades have enough to eat? No one going hungry? Hm... Perhaps you'd better make more sandwiches?"

Visiting me at my hotel he began feeling my bed with a worried air.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure that the sheets are not damp. You've got to look after your health."

In the autumn of 1918 I asked Dmitry Pavlov, a Sormovo worker, what, in his opinion, was Lenin's outstanding feature.

"Simplicity! He's as simple as the truth," he answered without hesitation, as though stating a long-established fact.

A man's subordinates are usually his severest critics, but Lenin's chauffeur Ghil, a man who had seen a great deal in his time, had the following to say:

"Lenin—he's a special kind. There's no one like him. One day I was driving through heavy traffic on Myasnitskaya; we were barely moving, and I kept blowing my horn afraid

somebody would hit us. I was terribly nervous. He opened the rear door, got alongside of me on the running-board at the risk of being knocked off, and talked to me soothingly: 'Please, Ghil, don't worry,' he said. 'Just keep going like everybody else! ' I'm an old driver, and know that no one else would have done such a thing."

It would be difficult to describe the naturalness and flexibility with which all Lenin's impressions converged in a single stream of thought.

Like the needle of a compass, his thought was always pointing to the class interest of the working people. One evening in London when we had nothing particular to do a group of us went to see a show at a small, democratic theatre. Vladimir Ilyich laughed heartily at the clowns and the comic numbers, looked at most of the others with indifference, and keenly watched the scene where a couple of lumberjacks from British Columbia felled a tree. The stage depicted a lumber camp, and these two strapping fellows axed through a tree-trunk over a yard thick in a minute.

"That's only to amuse the public, of course. In real life they can't work that fast," he commented. "Obviously, though, they go at it with axes over there too, reducing a lot of good wood to useless chips. That's the cultured British for you! "

He talked about the anarchy of production under the capitalist system, about the enormous percentage of wasted raw materials, and concluded with an expression of regret that no one had yet thought of writing a book about it. The idea was not entirely clear to me, but before I could ask any questions he was off on the subject of "eccentricity" as a special form of theatrical art.

"It is a satirical or sceptical attitude to the conventional, a desire to turn it inside out, to twist it a little, and disclose what is illogical in the customary. It's intricate—and interesting."

Discussing the Utopian novel with A.A. Bogdanov-Malinovsky in Capri two years later, he remarked:

"You ought to write a novel for the workers about how the capitalist robbers have plundered the Earth, squandering all its oil, iron, timber, and coal. That would be a very useful book, Signor Machist! "

Taking leave of us in London, he assured me that he would come to Capri for a holiday.

But before he came to Capri, I saw him in Paris, in a two-room student's flat; it was a student's flat only in size, however, and not in the perfect order in which it was kept. Nadezhda Konstantinovna made some tea for us and went out, leaving the two of us to talk. The Znaniye Publishing House was then folding up and I had come to talk to Vladimir Ilyich about organizing a new publishing house that could unite all our writers. I proposed that Vladimir Ilyich, V.V. Vorovsky, and someone else be the editors abroad, and that V.A. Desnitsky-Stroyev represent them in Russia.

I believed it was necessary to write a series of books on the history of Western and Russian literature, and on the history of culture, which would provide the workers with a wealth of factual material for their self-education and propaganda.

Vladimir Ilyich quashed that plan, however, in view of the censorship and the difficulty of organizing people; most of them were engaged in practical Party work, and had no time to write. His main and most convincing argument was that this was no time for bulky books: the consumer of bulky books was the intelligentsia, which was clearly withdrawing from socialism and going over to liberalism, and we could not move it from its chosen path. What we needed was a newspaper, pamphlets. It would be good to resume publication of the Znaniye series, but in Russia it was impossible because of the censorship, and here for reasons of transportation. We had to get hundreds of thousands of leaflets to the people, but such quantities could not be taken into the country illegally. And so we had to postpone the organization of a publishing house until better times.

With his astonishing liveliness and lucidity Lenin began to talk of the Duma, of the Constitutional Democrats who were "ashamed" of being "Octobrists", noting that the "only path before them led to the right". He then adduced a number of arguments showing that war was near, and "probably not just one war, but a whole series of wars". This forecast was soon to be confirmed in the Balkans.

He stood up, assuming his usual pose, his thumbs thrust

into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, and began slowly pacing the small room, his eyes gleaming through narrowed lids.

"War is coming. That's inevitable. The capitalist world has reached a state of putrefaction and people are already affected by the poison of chauvinism and nationalism. I think we shall yet witness an all-European war. The proletariat? I hardly think the proletariat will find the strength to prevent a blood-bath. How could it be done? By a general strike throughout Europe? The workers are not organized well enough for that, nor class-conscious enough. Such a strike would be the beginning of a civil war, and we, being realistic politicians, can't bank on such a thing."

Pausing in his stride, he added moodily:

"The proletariat will suffer terribly, of course, such, alas, is its fate for the time being. But its enemies will enfeeble one another; that, too, is inevitable."

He came up to me. "Just think of it!" he said with an air of wonder, quietly yet forcefully. "Think why those who have everything are driving those who have nothing to slaughter one another. Can you think of a crime more idiotic, more revolting? The workers will pay a terrible price for this, but they'll win in the end, such is the will of history."

Though he frequently spoke of history I never heard him say anything indicating that he bowed to its will and power as to a fetish.

Obviously agitated, he sat down at the table, wiped his forehead, took a sip of his cold tea and suddenly asked:

"Why did they raise all that hullabaloo about you in America? I read about it in the newspapers, but what did actually happen?"

I gave him a brief account of my adventures.

I have never met anyone who could laugh so infectiously as Vladimir Ilyich. It was really strange to see that this stern realist who so clearly saw and felt the inevitability of great social tragedies, a man who was unbending and implacable in his hatred of the capitalist world, could laugh like a child till the tears rose to his eyes. What a strong, healthy and sound spirit a man had to have to laugh like that!

"You're a humorist, aren't you!" he gasped through his laughter. "That's something I'd never have expected. It's awfully funny..."

Wiping his eyes, he smiled gently and remarked in a serious vein:

"It's good you can see the funny side of your set-backs. A sense of humour is a splendid, healthy quality. I'm very appreciative of humor, though I've no talent for it myself. There's probably as much humour in life as sadness, no less, I'm sure."

I was to call on him again two days later, but the weather changed for the worse and I had a hemoptysis attack that compelled me to leave town on the next day.

After Paris we met again in Capri. There I was left with the queer impression that Lenin had been there on two occasions in sharply different frames of mind.

The Vladimir Ilyich whom I went down to the wharf to meet at once told me in a most resolute tone:

"I know, Alexei Maximovich, that you're hoping to bring about my reconciliation with the Machists, though my letter has warned you that it's impossible. So please don't try!"

On our way to my place and after we arrived there I kept trying to explain that he was not altogether right, that I had no intention of reconciling philosophical differences which, incidentally, I did not understand any too well. Apart from this I had been suspicious of all philosophy from my youth, since it contradicted my "subjective" experience: the world was just "coming into shape" as far as I was concerned, and philosophy kept cuffing it with its inept and untimely questions:

"Where are you going? What for? Why do you think?"

Some philosophers indeed curtly commanded:

"Halt!"

In addition, I was already aware that, like a woman, philosophy could be very plain, even ugly, but so cunningly and convincingly dressed up that it could pass for a beauty. This made Vladimir Ilyich laugh.

"That's humourizing," he said. "But the world 'just coming into shape'—that's good! Give it some serious thought

and starting from there you'll get where you should have got to long ago."

I then remarked that A. A. Bogdanov, A. V. Lunacharsky, and V. A. Bazarov were big men in my eyes, men of excellent all-round education. I had not met their equals in the Party.

"Possibly. And what follows from this?"

"In the final analysis I regard them as men with the same aim, and the same aim, wholeheartedly accepted, ought to eliminate philosophical differences..."

"Which means you're still hoping for a reconciliation? That's futile!" he said. "Drive that hope away, that's my friendly advice! Plekhanov, too, is a man with the same aim, according to you, but—and let this remain between us—I think he is pursuing an altogether different aim, for all that he is a materialist and not a metaphysician."

Our talk ended there. It is hardly necessary to add that I have not set it down word for word, not literally, but I can vouch for the sense of it.

I now saw a Vladimir Ilyich Lenin who was even firmer, even more unbending than he had been at the London Congress. But there he had been worried; there had been moments when one could plainly perceive that the split in the Party was affecting him deeply.

Here he was serene, cool and mocking, flatly refusing to talk on philosophical themes, watchful and wary. A.A. Bogdanov, a most likeable and gentle man, though a little self-opinionated, had to listen to some pointed, cutting remarks from Lenin, with whom he was quite infatuated.

"Schopenhauer said: 'He who thinks clearly expounds things clearly.' That's the best thing he ever said, I think. But you, Comrade Bogdanov, expound things unclearly. Tell me, in two or three sentences, what your 'substitution' offers the working class and why Machism is more revolutionary than Marxism?"

Bogdanov tried to explain, but was really too wordy and foggy.

"Drop it!" advised Vladimir Ilyich. "Someone, I think it was Jaurès, once said: 'I'd rather tell the truth than be a Minister'; I would add: 'or a Machist'."

After which he played a game of chess with Bogdanov

and grew angry when he lost, even sulking rather childishly. This was extraordinary: like his surprising laughter, his childish sulking did not impair the monolithic wholeness of his character.

But there was another Lenin, too, in Capri—a splendid comrade, a cheerful person with a live unflagging interest in everything in the world, and an astonishingly kind approach to people.

Late one evening, when everybody had gone off for a walk, he said to M.F. Andreyeva and me in a tone that was sorrowful and deeply regretful:

“They are intelligent, talented people, they have done a great deal for the Party, they could do ten times more, but they won’t go with us! They can’t. Scores and hundreds like them are broken and crippled by this criminal system.”

On another occasion he remarked:

“Lunacharsky will return to the Party; he’s less of an individualist than those two. He is a man of rare gifts. I ‘have a weakness’ for him—what stupid words, damn it! ‘A weakness for someone!’ I’m fond of him, you know, he is an excellent comrade! There is a certain French brilliance in him. His frivolity is also French, the frivolity of his aestheticism.”

He made close enquiries about the lives of the Capri fishermen, he wanted to know what they earned, to what extent they were influenced by the priests; he asked about the schools they sent their children to. I was amazed at the range of his interests. Told that one of the priests was the son of a poor peasant, he immediately wanted to know how often the peasants sent their children to the religious schools, and whether they returned to serve as priests in their native villages.

“Do you see? If this is not mere chance, it must be Vatican policy... A very cunning policy too!”

I cannot think of another man who towered so high over everyone else, but was able to resist the temptations of ambition and retain a vital interest in the “common people”.

He had a magnetic quality that won the hearts and sympathies of the working people. He could not speak Italian, but the fishermen of Capri who had seen Chaliapin and

quite a few other prominent Russians intuitively assigned him a special place. There was great charm in his laughter—the hearty laughter of a man who, able though he was to gauge the clumsiness of human stupidity and the cunning capers of the intellect, could enjoy the childlike simplicity of a “guileless heart”.

“Only an honest man can laugh like that,” commented the old fisherman Giovanni Spadaro.

Rocking in his boat on waves as blue and transparent as the sky, Lenin tried to learn to catch fish “on the finger”, that is with a line, but no rod. The fishermen had told him to snatch in the line the instant his finger felt the slightest vibration.

“*Così drin-drin. Capisci?*” they said.

At that moment he hooked a fish, and hauled it in, shouting with the delight of a child and the excitement of a hunter:

“Aha! Drin-drin! ”

The fishermen shouted with laughter, like children too, and nicknamed him Signor Drin-Drin.

Long after Lenin had left, they still kept asking:

“How is Signor Drin-Drin? Are you sure the tsar won’t catch him?”

In the hungry, difficult year of 1919 Lenin was ashamed to eat the food sent him by his comrades and by soldiers and peasants from the provinces. When parcels were brought to his austere flat he immediately had the flour, sugar and butter distributed among those of his comrades who were ill or weak from undernourishment. Inviting me to dinner one day, he said:

“I can treat you to some smoked fish sent from Astrakhan.”

Wrinkling his Socratic brow, and looking aside with his all-seeing eyes, he added:

“They will send stuff as if I were their master! But how off? If I refused to accept it I’d hurt their feelings. And everybody’s hungry all around.”

A man of simple habits, a stranger to drinking or smoking, he was busy at his difficult and complicated work

from morning till night and though quite unable to see to his own needs he kept a sharp eye on the well-being of his comrades. One day I came to see him and found him busy writing something at his desk.

"Hullo, how are you?" he said, his pen never leaving the sheet of paper. "I'll be through in a minute. There's a comrade in the provinces who is fed up, apparently tired. We've got to cheer him up. A person's mood is no trifling thing!"

Once when I dropped in on him in Moscow he asked:

"Have you had dinner?"

"Yes."

"You're not making that up?"

"I've got witnesses—I had dinner in the Kremlin dining-room."

"I've heard the cooking is rotten there."

"Not rotten, but it could be better."

Whereupon he began to question me narrowly: why was the food bad? How could it be improved?

"What's the matter with them?" he fumed. "Can't they find a decent cook? People are working themselves to death; they've got to be given tasty food to make them eat more. I know that there's not enough and the stuff is poor, and that's why they need a capable cook." He then cited some dietician or other on the importance of flavour for digestion.

"How do you find time for such things?" I asked.

"For rational diets?" he countered, his tone indicating that my question was inept.

An old acquaintance of mine, P.A. Skorokhodov, a Sormovo man like me, was a soft-hearted person and once he complained to me about the strain of working in the Cheka. To which I observed:

"That's not the job for you, I think. You're not cut out for it."

"Quite right!" he agreed sadly. "I'm not cut out for it at all." But after reflecting a little, he went on: "Still, when I remember that Ilyich, too, probably has very often to force his heart, I'm ashamed of my weakness."

I have known quite a few workers who have had to clench their teeth and "force their hearts"—actually putting their "social idealism" under a terrible strain—for the triumph of the cause they were serving.

Did Lenin ever have to "force his heart"?

He was concerned with himself too little to talk to anyone about such things and no one was better able to keep secret the storms raging in his soul. Only once, while caressing someone's children in Gorki, he said:

"Their life will be better than ours; much of what was our life, they will not experience. Their lives will be less cruel."

But looking out at the hills where a village nestled, he added pensively:

"I don't envy them, though. Our generation has succeeded in doing a job of astounding historical importance. The cruelty of our life, forced upon us by conditions, will be understood and justified. It will all be understood, all of it!"

He patted the children gently, with a light, solicitous touch.

When I called on him one day, I saw a volume of *War and Peace* on his desk.

"That's right. Tolstoy! I meant to read the scene of the hunt, but then remembered I had to write to a comrade. I have no time at all to read. It was only last night that I read your book on Tolstoy."

Narrowing his eyes in a smile, he stretched luxuriously in his armchair and, dropping his voice, went on quickly:

"What a rock, eh? What a giant of a man! That, my friend, is an artist... And—do you know what else amazes me? There was no real muzhik in literature before that count came along."

He turned his twinkling eyes on me:

"Who in Europe could rank with him?"

He answered the question himself:

"No one."

He rubbed his hands and laughed, obviously pleased.

I had often noticed his pride in Russia, in Russians, in Russian art. That feature seemed foreign to Lenin, and even naive, but then I learned to distinguish in it the overtones of his deep-seated joyous love for the working people.

Watching the fishermen in Capri carefully disengaging the nets torn and tangled by a shark, he observed:

"Our people are livelier on the job."

When I expressed my doubts, he said irritably:

"Hm... You're not forgetting Russia, are you, living on this knoll?"

Listening to Beethoven's sonatas played by Isai Dobrowein at the home of Y.P. Peshkova in Moscow one evening, Lenin remarked:

"I know of nothing better than the *Appassionata* and could listen to it every day. What astonishing, superhuman music! It always makes me proud, perhaps naively so, to think that people can work such miracles!"

Wrinkling up his eyes, he smiled rather sadly, adding:

"But I can't listen to music very often, it affects my nerves. I want to say sweet, silly things and pat the heads of people who, living in a filthy hell, can create such beauty. One can't pat anyone on the head nowadays, they might bite your hand off. They ought to be beaten on the head, beaten mercilessly, although ideally we are against doing any violence to people. Hm—what a hellishly difficult job!"

Though in poor health himself and utterly exhausted, he wrote the following note to me on August 9, 1921:

"A. M. I

"I have sent your letter on to L.B. Kamenev. I am so tired that I am unable to do a thing. Just think, you have been spitting blood, but refuse to go!! This is truly most shameless and unreasonable on your part. In a good sanatorium in Europe, you will receive treatment, and also do three times as much useful work. Really and truly. Over here you have neither treatment, nor work—nothing but hustle. Plain empty hustle. Go away and recover. I beg you not to be stubborn!"

"Yours, Lenin"

For more than a year, with astonishing persistence, he had kept urging me to leave Russia, and I could not help wondering how he, so completely engrossed in his work, could remember that someone was sick somewhere and needed a rest.

He wrote letters of the sort just cited to various people, probably scores of them.

I have already mentioned his exceptional concern for his comrades, his attention to them, his keen interest in even the unpleasant, petty details of their lives. I was never able to detect in this concern of his the self-interested solicitude sometimes displayed by a clever master towards his capable and honest workers.

His was the truly sincere attention of a real comrade, the affection of an equal for his equals. I know that Vladimir Lenin had no equal even among the biggest men of his Party, but he did not seem to be aware of this, or rather—did not want to be. He was sharp with people when arguing with them, laughing at them, and even holding them up to biting ridicule. That is all very true.

Yet time and again, when he spoke of the people he had scolded and lambasted the day before, I plainly heard a note of sincere astonishment for their talent and moral fibre, of respect for their hard, unremitting effort under the hellish conditions of 1918-1921, when they worked surrounded by the spies of all countries and all political parties, amid conspiracies that ripened like suppurating boils on the body of war-emaciated country. They had worked without rest, eating little and poor food, living in a state of constant anxiety.

Lenin himself did not seem to feel the burden of those conditions, the anxieties of a life shaken to its foundations by the sanguinary storm of civil strife. Only once, while talking to M. F. Andreyeva, did anything like complaint, or what she took for a complaint, burst from him:

"But what can we do, my dear Maria Fyodorovna? We've got to keep fighting. We've got to! Of course it's hard on us. Do you think I don't find things hard, sometimes? Very hard, I can tell you! But look at Dzerzhinsky. See how haggard he looks! But there's nothing for it. Never mind if it's hard on us, as long as we win out! "

For my part, I heard him complain only once:

"What a pity," he said, "that Martov is not with us! What a wonderful comrade he is, what a pure heart! "

I remember how long and heartily he laughed when he

read somewhere that Martov had said: "There are only two Communists in Russia, Lenin and Kollontai."

Recovering from his laughter he added with a sigh:

"How clever he is! Oh well..."

After seeing an economic executive to the door of his study, he said with the same respect and wonder:

"Have you known him long? He could head a cabinet in any European country."

Rubbing his hands, he added:

"Europe is poorer in talent than we."

I suggested that he visit the Chief Artillery Headquarters with me to look at the invention of a former artilleryman, a Bolshevik. It was a device to correct anti-aircraft fire.

"What do I know of such things?" he said, but went with me just the same. In a darkish room we found seven grim generals, all of them grey, moustached, and erudite, sitting round the table on which the device was set up. Lenin's modest civilian figure seemed lost among them. The inventor proceeded to explain the construction. Listening for a minute or two, Lenin uttered approvingly "Hm" and began to question the man as easily as if he were putting him through an examination on political problems:

"How does the aiming mechanism manage a double task? Couldn't the angle of the gun barrels be adjusted automatically to the readings of the mechanism?"

He also asked about the range and some other things, receiving ready answers from the inventor and the generals.

"I had told my generals that you were coming with a comrade, but did not tell them who that comrade was," the inventor told me afterwards. "They didn't recognize Ilyich, and probably they could not imagine him turning up so quietly, without ceremony and without a guard. 'Is he a technician, a professor?' they asked. 'Lenin!' They were speechless. 'And how did he happen to know our particular field so well? The questions he asked gave the impression of technical competence!' They were mystified. I don't think they really believe he was Lenin..."

On his way back from the Artillery Headquarters, Lenin kept laughing, saying of the inventor:

"How wrong one can be in sizing up a man! I knew he was a good old comrade, but hardly brilliant. And that's exactly what he's turned out to be good for. Excellent chap! Did you see those generals bristle when I expressed doubt about the practical value of the device? I did it on purpose—to see what they really thought of that clever gadget of his."

He laughed again, and asked:

"You say he has another invention? Why isn't something done about it? He ought to be busy with nothing else. Ah, if only we could give all those technicians ideal working conditions! Russia would be the most advanced country in the world in twenty-five years! "

I often heard him praise people. He was able to talk in this manner even about those whom it was said he did not like, paying the tribute to their energy.

...His attitude to me was that of a strict mentor and kind "solicitous friend".

"You're an enigma," he once said to me with a chuckle. "You seem to be a good realist in literature, but a romantic where people are concerned. You think everybody is a victim of history, don't you? We know history and we say to the sacrificial victims: 'Overthrow the altars, shatter the temples, and drive the gods out! ' Yet you would like to convince me that a militant party of the working class is obliged to make the intellectuals comfortable, first and foremost."

I may be mistaken, but I felt that Vladimir Ilyich liked discussing things with me, and he nearly always parted from me with the words, "When you're in town, call me up and we'll meet."

On another occasion he remarked:

"Discussing things with you is always interesting, with your wider and greater range of impressions."

He asked me about the sentiments of the intellectuals with special stress on the scientists: A. B. Khalatov and I at that time were working with the Scientists' Welfare Commission. And he was also interested in proletarian literature.

"Do you expect anything from it?"

I said I expected a great deal, but felt it was essential to organize a literary college with branches of philology,

Occidental and Oriental languages, folklore, the history of world literature, and a separate department for the history of Russian literature.

"Hm," he muttered, squinting and chuckling. "That's very ambitious and dazzling! I don't mind it being ambitious, but will it be dazzling? We haven't any professors of our own in this sphere. As for the bourgeois professors, you can imagine what sort of history they'll give us... No, that's more than we can tackle now... We'll have to wait another three or may be five years."

He went on plaintively:

"I've no time at all to read!... Don't you find that an awful lot of verses are being written nowadays? There are whole pages of them in the magazines, and new collections keep appearing every day."

I said that the young people's yearning for song was natural in such times, and that mediocre verses, to my mind, were easier to write than good prose. Verses took less time to write, I observed, and besides we had many good teachers of prosody.

"Oh no, I can't believe that poems are easier to write than prose! I can't imagine such a thing. I couldn't write two lines of poetry, even if you threatened to skin me." He continued with a frown, "The whole of the old revolutionary literature, as much of it as we have and as there is in Europe, must be available to the masses."

He was a Russian who had lived away from Russia for a long time and was examining his country attentively—it had appeared more picturesque and colourful from afar. He correctly appraised its potential force—that is, the exceptional but, as yet feebly expressed, giftedness of the people unawakened by history, heavy and dreary; but there was talent everywhere, standing out in bright golden stars against the sombre background of fantastic Russian life.

Vladimir Lenin, a big, real man of this world, has passed away. His death is a painful blow to all who knew him, a very painful blow!

But the black line of death will only underscore his

importance in the eyes of all the world—the importance of the leader of the world's working people.

If the clouds of hatred for him, the clouds of lies and slander woven round him were even denser it would not matter, for there is no force that could dim the torch he raised in the stifling darkness of a world gone mad.

Never has there been a man who deserves more to be remembered forever by the whole world.

Vladimir Lenin is dead. But those to whom he bequeathed his wisdom and his will are living. They are alive and working more successfully than anyone on earth has ever worked before.

1924, 1930

Translated by Bernard Isaacs

LIDIA SEIFULINA

(1889-1954)

Lidia Seifulina made her début in Soviet literature during the early years of its emergence. Her first stories came out in 1917-1919. In 1922 she published her first short novel, "Four Chapters", and then a story, "The Lawbreakers", that attracted the attention of the reading public.

According to Soviet critic Yekaterina Starikova, the most striking feature of Seifulina's first books is the "organic fusion of cruel honesty and stark frankness with a great faith in the triumph of good and justice and in the possibility of a better future even for the most deprived and sinful of human beings."

In the first years after the Revolution, Seifulina was school-

teacher, housemother in a home for waifs and strays, lecturer, actress and journalist. Her sound knowledge of life and her active part in the stormy events of the era are reflected in her work. Truthfully and with originality, she depicted the face of "the crowd", conveying the richness and occasional coarseness of its language.

In 1923, Seifulina moved from Siberia to Moscow, but the main theme of her work continued to be the faraway Siberian countryside in which everything was changing and which was determinedly seeking its way in the new life. It is to this theme that her best-known story, "Virineya" (1924), is dedicated.

*THE CLEMENCY OF GENERAL DUTOV**

I

The old woman was staring with an expression that can only come from hatred or love. The wind was lashing her cruelly and blowing the acrid dust into her eyes. It was flapping, as if in derision, the ends of her headscarf and the new black skirt made specially for holidays.

But she remained standing on the corner. Without taking her eyes off it, she stared at the long house with the two sentry-boxes on either side and at the bored sentries. The street lay between her and the house. But the old woman was not interested in what was happening on that street. People were riding, walking, laughing, hurrying, talking, saying nothing—it was all as in a mist to her.

A red-cheeked young man in officer's uniform was passing by. He looked at the old woman and his mouth twitched in annoyance. He looked to either side of him and went up to her. The old woman trembled and transferred her inflamed eyes from the house to him.

"Are you Commissar Burzyantsev's mother?"** he asked awkwardly.

The old woman seemed to come out of a trance. Her face was contorted in a beseeching smile forced out of her by anguish. Her eyes begged, like those of a dog. She began bowing low, again and again.

*English translation ©Raduga Publishers 1985

**The story is based on an actual incident. In 1919, in Orenburg, M. Burzyantsev, gubernia commissar of law, had been shot. Although she was non-Party, his wife was also condemned to death. The charge was simply that she was the wife of a commissar. Her husband's parents appealed for mercy on the grounds that the sentence would also be carried out on a person as yet unborn. The decision was referred to General Dutov, head of the military government. He slapped a resolution on the appeal for mercy: "Sentence to be carried out after birth of child".—Note by L.N. Seifulina.

"I, I... The mother... Yes... Yes... You recognized me, Your Honour... The mother, the mother..."

The officer had a shifty look, as if he wanted to avoid the old woman. He remembered that she and her husband had kept calling on him for three days. She had thrown herself at his feet and had wanted to kiss his boots. The old man had stood there with his head bowed low and had merely repeated in a muffled, imploring voice:

"One son... Only one survived. We're peasants... We used up everything we had, we gave him an education, Mister Officer, everything we had... We went without food."

The old man's eyes were dull and he kept saying the same thing over and over again: "Everything we had."

"Reckons up his outgoings, but isn't sorry for his son," the officer had thought at the time.

He was counsel for the defence in the military district court. He had promised to intercede, just to get rid of them. He knew that the commissar would be executed without trial. Now that "sentence had been carried out", why was the old woman waiting outside General Dutov's house? He glanced sideways at her best clothes with an apprehensive, passing thought. He remembered that the old man had been dressed up too. A picture flashed across his mind's eye.

These peasants dressed up in their best so as to make a good impression. They had gone to the court, to the generals, to the colonels in their quarters, to the rural council, the party committees, wherever they could gain admission. They had bowed and pleaded for their son. They had crowned their long years of servitude with this last futile act of self-abasement.

The officer's collar felt too tight. He turned his head awkwardly twice. He had been raised in an intellectual family and he had heard much about humaneness. He reviewed all this in a split second and again felt worried. Why was she at General Dutov's house?

The old woman herself answered the unvoiced question.

"My son has left a wife. They're going to shoot her too. They told me and my old man. Mister Officer, she's only eighteen... Misha was twenty-four, but she's only eighteen. She's not done anything wrong. It's not her fault he was a commissar. She's only eighteen."

The officer was completely nonplussed.)

"What could anyone do? Face up to it: she was his wife, not your daughter."

"Mister Officer... For Christ's sake... I've never seen her before. Misha got married in town... I'm not asking for her, I'm asking for the baby. She's carrying, she's going to have a baby. Don't shoot her, let her live with the child..."

"Yes, but you see... The law has to be strict..."

"Mister Officer, she's only eighteen. They said she was non-Party. And the child... Mister Officer... She's carrying Misha's child..."

She wasn't weeping tears, but the senile, imploring voice was choked with sobs. The officer's lips twitched and he knitted his brows.

"So what do you want?" he asked.

"To hand a petition to General Dutov. They said he could do it. He could stop the execution, even though she's been sentenced. They won't let me through to him. This is my third day here. I'm waiting. He might come out of the house and I'll run up to him. I didn't make it yesterday. I was scared of the soldiers. He went off in an automobile. He's a big man, he has a bodyguard all the time."

The officer hesitated.

"You won't be admitted to see the general," he said. "Give me the petition and I'll hand it to him."

The old lady began quivering all over with prayerful gratitude. She took a big sheet of paper out of her bosom and gave it to the officer.

II

Perhaps the powerful, healthy cry—I want to live—had only been hidden. But she could not hear its voice any more. It made no difference. As if not eighteen, but seventy years of her life had already passed by. She was only physically aware of the weight in her belly. And one sleepy, stupefied thought: she would be more comfortable if she could lie down. Yesterday she had thrashed about, sobbed and wept. They had informed her of General Dutov's resolution. On the petition in which they had asked for her

child's life to be spared, the general had written:

"Sentence to be carried out after birth of child."

She did not know the details. The general had said:

"They're all tarred with the same brush. But we're cultured people. The child can be allowed to live."

She did not know this, but she knew what the general had not thought. A child born in mental anguish, in prison, must fight to survive. Along with the resolution, they had brought her the news from outside that Mikhail's father had died of a stroke. The old lady was alive, but she wouldn't last long after that. Who would take the child? Why? Oh, it made no difference. She felt neither tenderness for it nor pity. General Dutov had deigned to save its life, but she wouldn't be there any more. They were going to kill her! Well, what of it! She would just be more comfortable if she could lie down and go to sleep! But sleep would not come. Suddenly, she remembered a sentence from Mikhail's last letter.

"It hurts me that you're still an immature girl, you haven't really lived, you have no encouraging, strong faith, you've not yet found yourself; but I've destroyed you. Will you find any consolation in the hope that we're in the right?.."

She knew nothing now; everything had suddenly collapsed in ruins. Her consolation was in blazing hatred. Such people cannot be forgiven. They'd made the child his mother's executioner: as soon as it was born, they were going to kill her. And at once she sat up. She was suddenly aware of the filthy walls of the solitary confinement cell, the little window with the iron grille and the hollow, indifferent footsteps in the passage. This was her last home. She would give birth and they'd kill her. There was a movement in her belly. As if it was knocking to remind her of itself, the unwitting executioner. Something tugged at her throat, but she could not weep. She was overwhelmed by a sudden wave of tenderness.

"My child... Ours... It will be born, someone will tell it how it tormented its mother. Put off the inevitable end, but only put it off. Made the despair before death last longer."

Then came a ray of hope.

"Perhaps they'll come... Our side. Drive this lot away..."
But it faded immediately.

"No, I won't live to see it. My time is near and the news from outside is bad."

Again she was crushed by a huge burden. She lay prone on the bed. If she could, she would have crushed the baby to death to stop it moving. It was bringing death. Why was it ever conceived? Better if it could be all over now. She writhed in anguish and bitterness.

"Damned... Damned..."

Who was she cursing? She didn't know. The general and the babe alike.

Dutov's clemency had deprived her of the last thing left to her—the joy of motherhood.

1922

Translated by Alex Miller

ALEXANDER MALYSHKIN

(1892-1938)

Alexander Malyshkin belonged to that generation of Soviet writers who entered the literary scene after the 1917 October Revolution. Recalling those years, Alexander Fadeyev said about himself and his colleagues: "We poured into literature wave upon wave, there were so many of us. Each one had his own life experience, his own individuality, but we were united by our infatuation with the new socialist world, our very own world."

Malyshkin was born in Bogorodskoye, a village in Penza Gubernia, where his father worked in a grocery. Of his childhood Malyshkin wrote: "We were poor, our origins were lowly and humble, and I was the first boy in our whole clan whom his father had the impudence to enroll in a grammar school to rub shoulders with his betters." In 1911 Malyshkin was admitted to the philological department of St. Petersburg University, and that was when his first short stories appeared in print with the

"little man" as the central figure, true to Russian classical tradition.

After graduation in 1916, Malyshkin was enlisted in the Black Sea Fleet on active service, and after the October 1917 Revolution was elected deputy of the Brigade Soviet.

In "The Fall of Dair" (1923), which made him popular with readers, Malyshkin describes the battle for Perekop during the Civil War. The emotional narrative, rather in the style of a heroic ballad, was likened by many critics to the poetic idiom of Alexander Douzhenko, the famous Soviet film maker.

"A Train to the South" is one of Malyshkin's best stories, in which the appeal lies not so much in the description of happenings, but in the revelation of love, an all-conquering love that completely transforms man, discerned by the author through the outer shell of ordinariness, inconspicuousness and even roughness.

*A TRAIN TO THE SOUTH**

Do you know that special feeling you get before a holiday? It's like a breeze from some invisible sunny garden blowing round you and plucking at your heartstrings. You get your first taste of it in the spring, when the trade-union committee begins looking around for beds in the Crimea, and the typists leave off their woolly jackets and bring sunshine and the breath of wide-open tram windows to the office of a morning on their summer frocks and blouses. You are reminded of it by the accountant in your department who has already moved out of town for the summer. Even over his desk, that hallowed shrine of concentration, and over its fat pile of figure-filled ledgers there's a gleam of the moonlight on the Klyazma and birches rustling late in to the night, the truant night of a park with its sequestered corners and rendezvous. You carry the timetables of south-bound trains about with you in your head, and office walls, even in the middle of Moscow, turn to glass, and past them rush—oh, how they rush! —the fresh and boundless expanses of the steppes.

And there was something else that made me want to go south.

There was a time when the steppes vibrated with destruction, and every little wayside station won in battle carried a promise of something better than the world had ever known before. You probably remember the war communiques about the tragic fate of the 6th Urals Regiment near the village of Bereznevatka. It was I who managed to discover that piece of treachery in time and, after twenty-four hours of continuous fighting, to break through to our division with the bleeding remnants of the regiment, having

lost half my men, including my only brother.

How strange to see again that field with its smell of irretrievable youth and of death. I had quite forgotten that smell in three years.

I remember, just before I left Moscow, one evening in August I went into a cinema in the Arbat. Everything was just as it should be. Blank-faced couples strolling up and down the foyer, violins wailing in the throes of *The Bayadere*, the pianist bouncing up and down on his stool like a man possessed. From behind the huge, heavily curtained windows came the whirl and bustle of the square, the subterranean rumble of tramcars carrying their people-filled, light-filled windows down the boulevard. I remembered about my journey, about the south, and I don't know why, but then it seemed impossible that there had ever been a place called Bereznevatka, or any disaster to the 6th Regiment, or daybreak over the smoking Perekop. To think of these things was like looking into a desecrated grave. And now those dark fields were being desecrated by trains racing southward to happiness.

I, too, might have been lying there among those nameless dead!

But that was all because I was overtired. On the morning of my departure there was such a cheerful squash on the platform and the sky was so joyously blue that I almost forgot all about it. I knew only that I was free, I emptied my head of all those case files, reports and references—I did a war-dance on the lot of them.

The Sevastopol train was due out at two. I sat in my compartment, wondering idly whom I should be travelling with. The first to arrive were two young ladies, evidently secretaries from some office of solid reputation; their yellow suitcases, their travelling-bags with embroidered initials and, of course, the flowers for the table, all spoke of a life of cleanliness and comfort under Mummy's protecting wing. And there they were standing under the carriage window, two stiffly corseted, heavy-jowled mammas of the old world, with huge patent-leather handbags. "Don't forget to write!" they fussed. "The evenings are cool, Zhenya dear, be sure to wear your cardigan! Sonya dear,

mind you go and see Sofia Andreyevna in Yalta! ”

And Zhenya dear, bare-armed, and glance-kissed by admirers, and with an attractive mole under one dark eye, shrilled back capriciously, “Tell Vladimir Andreyevich! .. He promised to arrange it.” And something else about a trade-union committee that had to be informed, and a postcard she would be sure to send from Kharkov.

The second, a meaty damsel in a silk skirt—oh, she’ll make a very nice mother, one of these days, one of the kind who are always running, too late for their tram, and panting with despair under the weight of numerous parcels—the second merely inclined her luxurious golden stack of hair and probably gave a languid smile.

“Mummy, don’t forget to feed Tuska,” was her instruction.

Both of them had an intoxicated gleam in their eyes. Ah yes, I could see the kind of rooms they lived in—furniture museums, with their chair covers, their little shelves, their knick-knacks, with all the atmosphere of the old official pomposity, rooms of 1910 to 1914, successfully nursed through the storm of the revolution to our relaxing peaceful days. And now, for the first time after those terrible years—off to the Crimea again, just as of old!

Then came an armyman, with regiment commander’s tabs on his collar, a big hulking chap of about thirty, with a womanish weather-beaten rustic face that was already smiling at everybody in advance with good-natured awkwardness. Before half an hour was out I knew that he was called Grigory Ivanych, and that he had tried once for the Academy but had failed on general education, and was now going to have another try, and this time he would pass, definitely, just to spite all these posh suitcases and all the mammas in the world.

“You off for a rest-cure too?” he asked me in his polite tenor voice, folding a pair of great purple hands in his lap.

“Yes, to the South,” I replied and thought to myself, glancing at him with admiring envy: “What the devil do you need a rest-cure for?”

And as if in answer to my unspoken question, he smiled back at me with the terrible smile of shell-shock, which

suddenly crumpled his blooming cheeks, a lightning smile that has to be brushed aside like a tear. Through that smile came a night of battle, of twisted darkness and creeping death... "Aha," I thought, "so you know what it is too!"

And finally a gloomy married couple arrived whom, judging by their resentful, harassed appearance, fate had been chasing from pillar to post. Now they were stall-keepers in Voronezh, now cashiers at the Lebedyan Co-operative Stores, now railway workers in Moscow, and always pursued by financial trouble or reduction of staff... The bells rang jubilantly for the last time and the mammas waved their handkerchiefs, dodging the wildly swerving porters' trolleys. And soon we were deep in a dense clanking forest of railway trucks, and after that it was just golden dusty emptiness. Goodbye, Moscow!

Grigory Ivanych and I got up to look over the heads of the girls at the swirling farewell haze of roofs below us. And suddenly I noticed that Grigory Ivanych had caught sight of the mole under Zhenya's eyelash and was all of a dither. He was stealing glances at her, furtively shy, boyish glances.

"It's not worth it, Grigory Ivanych," I wanted to say to him. "You wouldn't understand their posh kind of rooms and those delicate scents, and the things they say would give you the wrong idea, when you're thinking seriously how to save fifteen rubles or so out of your expenses on this trip to send home to help the old lady pay for a bit of rethatching for the winter. She'll be puzzled and bored by your rustic simplicity, Grigory Ivanych."

We rushed through the yawning stillness of suburban platforms and wayside stations out into the wilds, into the cool and darkness of the woods, and everywhere we sowed rebellion, clatter and dust.

The young ladies grew tired. They sat down opposite each other at the table and, straightening their wind-blown coiffures, looked us over with cursory indifference. Inspiration came to Grigory Ivanych and he dived under the seat for the kettle. Soon we should be in Serpukhov.

Grigory Ivanych took swift aim at the young ladies' enamelled kettle.

"Can I fill your little fellow for you?"

Taken by surprise, Zhenya stared at him inquiringly. "Certainly..."

When the train stopped, spurs and kettles went clanking post-haste up the corridor. Zhenya leaned out of the window.

"Don't get left behind!" she shouted after him.

I was afraid to look, in case Grigory Ivanych had tripped over in an excess of bliss.

We floated out into the rolling lands beyond Serpukhov; the moon was a red bonfire and shadowy depths were swallowing up churches and villages and the fields beyond wrapped in mist. Over tea Grigory Ivanych grew bolder in talking to the young ladies. But I didn't trust Zhenya's exaggerated attentiveness, I didn't trust her kind, round-eyed smile. Was it not generated by the same feelings that made her wear a red kerchief at political demonstrations in Moscow or make laughing eyes at the Communist chairman of the trade-union committee? Yes, she was a sly one, she knew how to hit it off with the bosses. And soon we had learned that Sonya and she were going to Alupka, and then along the south coast of the Crimea; and that they had been there when they were only schoolgirls, in 1914, and then war had been declared and there had been such a panic, such a panic.

"But don't you remember the Gates of Baidary, Sonya?"

"Ah, the Gates of Baidary! .." Sonya's face was an ecstatic pucker.

"Are you going to Sevastopol too?" Zhenya asked and her eyes had a playful point-blank challenge in them. To how many had that challenge been issued before, across the piano, under the drooping tulip petals of the lampshade? How many, I wondered.

"No, I go through Simferopol. Those, er ... Baidary Gates, I've seen them already. Our brigade went all over that part..."

Grigory Ivanych was trying to think of something special.

"Here, I've got it all written down—what's where. It's very interesting! After Kharkov we'll be in the chicken country, you'll be able to eat as much as you like, ha! ha! ha!" Grigory Ivanych's hoarse little laugh was womanishly polite. "And then after Melitopol there'll be

fried chub. Chub are the thing, ha! ha! ha! ”

He couldn't sit still, he was bubbling with joy, he kept pestering the surly married couple with offers of tea.

At first they refused, but then they opened their bag and produced enormous army mugs, which they self-consciously held out to Grigory Ivanych. He started pouring and he went on pouring long and patiently until his arm ached with the strain. But the mug seemed to be bottomless. Grigory Ivanych felt awkward, but it would have been even more awkward to stop, and the woman shame-facedly holding out her mug felt awkward too; her black teeth smiled pitifully. After that effort of hospitality Grigory Ivanych sat in silence, as if he had been spat upon; he would have preferred the earth to open and swallow him up.

In the twilight we burst into Tula, into a jaunty provincial evening of twinkling lights; the young ladies got out to take a walk in the lamp-lit cool and strolled slowly up and down, utterly aloof from us. After the experience of the mugs Grigory Ivanych dared not approach them and skulked at a distance, in wretched solitude. But I was glad. The walls that had enclosed me had fallen apart. In this fresh darkness I could at last imagine beyond every station a boundless city, with thousands of lives, any of which might cross with mine. And Bereznevatka was still somewhere beyond the dark curving bulk of the earth, still living in a smoky haze of sadness.

Zhenya put on a warm knitted jacket and went out into the corridor, to the open window. Out there was the cold night, and the wonderful forests rushing past endlessly, and it was like a song without a beginning or an end. Now would be the time to look into her real face, full of virgin languor! But Grigory Ivanych was not there, he was roaming about miserably in another part of the train, and at the next stop a close-shaven young man from a first-class carriage went past under the window. He was well dressed, and to Zhenya he lifted eyes that seemed fathomless in the twilight and sang very wonderfully; you know what it's like, that singing under windows, when the trees are rustling and someone carries past you into the night a joy that is surprised at itself. Poor Grigory Ivanych, what a moment you missed! But here he was, our Grigory Ivanych, thundering

triumphantly down the corridor, all out of breath—nearly got left behind probably—and under each arm a huge watermelon.

"Fine pair of watermelons! " he shouted to us in Ukrainian and couldn't help giving one of his hoarse little laughs as, without letting go of his prize, he plumped his massive frame down on the seat.

"I don't know your proper name, miss! You'll get something in your eye out there. Just come and look what a couple of monsters I've bought for twenty kopeks! "

Zhenya came in lackadaisically, her eyes misty in the light and still dreamy, and shook her head. No, she didn't want any, it was cold enough as it was. And she frowned with a shiver.

"Sonya, are you going to bed now?"

But some dark rebellious force sprang up in Grigory Ivanych and he was not going to give in for anything.

"But look what a beauty she is," he protested wildly and suddenly brought the watermelon down with a thump on his knee.

And it cracked apart into two luxuriously ripe and juicy halves brimming with ragged, scarlet, sugar-oozing pulp, which a knife sliced swiftly for Zhenya.

"Here you are, miss! " and Grigory Ivanych dealt us all a piece each, as if he were sharing out happiness itself.

Even Zhenya could not refuse, going into fits of the silliest laughter, neither could the stuck-up fat one. And the sulky married couple and I, too, accepted slices and ate of a coolness that smelled of thawing spring snow. Grigory Ivanych, who had had his fill of silence, chattered and laughed enough for the five of us.

The train stopped in the midst of nocturnal orchards.

I went out on to the platform and by the glow of bluish lamplight found the name of the station. At one time Denikin and Mamontov* had been through here and our Red Army trains had rumbled after them. I turned my back to the light and half-closed my eyes, trying to picture the scene. Smashed windows, the quivering light of

*Russian generals who led counter-revolutionary armies during the Civil War of 1918-1920.—Ed.

kerosene wicks in the station hall, where the ragged, desperate, lice-ridden troops, sent against Moscow, huddled with their rifles on the floor and the benches, while the locomotives outside roared like mortally wounded animals. But I could not picture it—the cold took me in its embrace like a river, and in the dim orchards the leaves rustled bravely, thick and young. Oh, to drop down in the grass and go to sleep with the breeze from the steppe murmuring over me...

In the distance I spotted Grigory Ivanych. He was skipping along joyfully towards the carriage with another monster watermelon pressed to his stomach. At the steps we nearly bumped into each other but he carefully avoided me and turned aside waiting till his nervous tick had passed.

In the dark compartment, where everyone was asleep, he touched me on the shoulder.

"Too late. And it's a grand watermelon. Do you want some?" And then in a whisper he asked confusedly: "What shall I do with my boots for the night? My feet smell."

"What nonsense," I said.

Nevertheless he went to bed like a martyr, with his heavily booted feet dangling over the edge of the bunk.

I was left to myself, and the train rushed wailing on in the tracks of Mamontov. And the dark fields closed in on the roads, the towns, and my dreams like a great cloud.

Here had been yellowed stubble for endless hundreds of versts, where the harvest had just passed like the busy waters of spring. Bandit-held stations waist-deep in bushes and poplars; barefooted women on the platform with food, with their pots, their watermelons, all the abundance of village and orchard, and with cheeks like ripe plums. And over the station was the sun, and beyond it wound those bandit roads, where not so long ago Makhno, Shchus and Khmara* used to give the Red mopping-up detachments the slip. Along one of those roads, over its grey-blue dusty softness, oxen were dragging a wagon, and a young demobilized soldier in a faded tunic, who was lying on his belly

*Leaders of anarchist bands which opposed Soviet power in the Ukraine in 1918-1920.—Ed.

on the load, looked up to meet the train with drowsy overfed eyes. And in the ditches beyond the village, with their age-old posts and rusty barbed wire, the burdock and the goose-foot and the stinging nettles grew thick, and in the darkness of spider's webs and grasses the chickens clucked.

Everything was overgrown and obese and heaped over with smugness and heedlessness.

Again we ate watermelons in our compartment and near Kharkov we ate cheap chicken, although by now we didn't even want to look at them, let alone eat them; and drank—who knows how many times—tea from Grigory Ivanych's kettle. I suspected that the blonde had developed constipation, and Grigory Ivanych, the innocent, never let the two young ladies out of his sight, clanking after them protectively in his spurs and even volunteering to take them to the station letter-box at Kharkov. The letter-box had been thought up by the blonde to have an undisturbed session in the station toilet and now she trotted down the platform in agony, holding onto Zhenya's arm, and Zhenya could only laugh and laugh and cast playful glances at the windows of the first-class carriage.

And I gloated. There you are, you wouldn't listen to me, Grigory Ivanych! But he had ceased to exist—that hoarse titter and those spurs, were they the real Grigory Ivanych?

And it was from this hive of smugness and heedlessness that a new family came into our compartment to take the place of the gloomy couple, who had slipped away inconspicuously in Kharkov. The robust angry-faced woman had a baby in her arms; her husband, a fiery-eyed young fellow like a gypsy, followed her, leading a little girl of about four. Then came their sacks, their baskets and their blankets—all piled in a heap with the squealing baby on the blonde young lady's bed; the mother, quite unconcerned, pulled out her big breast and immediately began to feed the baby. At every stop the young man ran off busily for food and hot water. It seemed to me that I had seen him somewhere before, this docile young man uncomplainingly looking after everyone with a quiet, apologetic air.

The young ladies cast sidelong glances, shrugged their shoulders and harboured venom on their lips. The young ladies were displeased.

And, indeed, watermelon peel and pulp and other unchewed fragments were soon scattered all over the floor, making a squelching slippery mess, on which the elder girl with a large chunk of watermelon in her hands skipped and jumped to her heart's content. And she also contrived to upset a kettle full of boiling water and splash the blonde young lady's skirt.

Then the blonde had a real wail.

"It's disgusting, I can't understand it. Making such a mess, such chaos, spoiling a person's dress... I'm going to complain."

The woman rocked her baby unconcernedly, without even looking round.

"You will be fined for messing up the carriage," I said feeling it was time for me to intervene. "Look, what a state it's in."

Her exasperated silence exploded.

"Well, let them!" she shouted. "I've got children. Can't you see—children! Why don't you travel first-class if there's not enough comfort for you here? Just a lot of..."

The young man stood leaning back with his elbows on the bunk and merely chuckled. You couldn't tell whether it was cheek or simplicity. I eyed him firmly and deliberately. He continued to smile back at me with that smile I thought I had seen in the old anxious days but could not remember. I answered the woman severely:

"We are not just anybody, we are workers in Soviet organizations. Bear that in mind."

"And you're taking up all the sitting room!" the blonde burst out again through tears, rustling her wet skirt.

I was not a bit attracted by the prospect of a quarrel. I went out, and for I don't know how many hours stood at the end of the corridor by the noisy open window.

The fields flowed past infinitely remote. The lilac lines of hill-tops rose behind them on the horizon, against the warming light of daybreak. I imagined a legendary army marching along that ridge into the dawn; the soldiers' faces were pink from the sun that was as yet invisible. Yes, this was the first song-breath of Bereznevatka, of the land that had taken three hundred of my comrades, every one of whom I had known by his first name. In the night

the train would rush over them with its muffled sleeping-cars.

...And at night there was an alarm.

On the Serebryanoye-Bereznevatka part of the line the night before a band had held up the express. And so at the junction an armed guard boarded our train. A breath of half-forgotten storms, of 1919, floated through the carriage. The passengers huddled in groups in their dim compartments, the young people laughed, a bearded man on one of the upper bunks got very worried: "The devil knows what they're up to, perhaps they're in ambush somewhere already!" "You must have a lot of money in your pocket if it makes you feel that scared!" a cheerful bandy-legged lad in bulbous breeches laughed at him.

A glimmering candle had been lighted in our compartment and the woman, once again taking no notice of anyone, was nursing her baby. How many more such grim evenings would she know in life? The young man, silently helpful as ever, fed them all for the night, made up the beds and went for water. They had a stifling effect on me.

It was a sullen night, fit indeed for bandits. The passengers made haste to get to sleep, so that they could forget their alarm and wake up in the sunshine. The blonde, alone now, heaved her bulk irritably on to an upper bunk, spanning the compartment with her capacious maternal thighs. I was left to myself.

I decided to look for Grigory Ivanych. The train was going downhill and I was thrown about. The door at the end of the corridor flew open at my touch—clanking, screeching, cold. He was there, but not alone—they were both leaning out of the window, squeezed happily together.

At first I didn't understand. Of course, it was merely because Zhenya was really afraid of bandits; now she needed someone's broad and reassuring strength. What else could suddenly have thrust her under the wing of a muzhik?

"The station's a bit further on. I'll show it to you..." Grigory Ivanych was saying, and this was the voice of another Grigory Ivanych, the one I had been waiting for. "But I'm still alive, you see, and going to the seaside. And in two or three years' time, maybe I shall pass this way again and it'll all be different, and I'll be speaking two languages..."

"Tell me some more..." I heard Zhenya ask quietly, or say something else, subdued and appealing. They did not see me, I stepped back and quietly closed the door.

I don't know why I was suddenly assailed by a vague feeling of grief. Perhaps because I had guessed wrong and life had easily trampled on my feeble thought; perhaps because I, too, wanted to march through life victorious.

And I returned to my corner in the compartment and dozed off. And everyone was asleep; even the meek young man was sleeping with his head resting against the iron post.

It was not much further now to Bereznevatka. To Bereznevatka? So there was such a place on earth after all?

...At midnight an armed patrol came round to check our papers.

The dimly swaying corners of the world were half buried in sleep. The young man also opened his eyes drowsily, asked me for a light and rummaged carefully in his pockets.

"Here's my Party card to go on with," he said. "Wait a minute and I'll find my passport."

Two foreheads came together over a lamp to examine the document.

"This'll do," they said with gruff respect. We were left alone in the sleeping, monotonous, rushing stillness. I felt the eyes of the man opposite appealing to me.

"Comrade," he said suddenly in a low voice, leaning forward, "I wanted to apologize for what happened, for the wife. She's a bit," he laughed good-naturedly, "she's a bit nervy, you know; it took it out of her working in the underground."

I was a little surprised, but hastened to reassure him politely, and said that I had forgotten all about it. He seemed anxious to talk. He mentioned the bandits. I said I knew this locality well—there would be a gradient before Bereznevatka, then a cutting. It was the best place for an ambush. I had been here with the Sixth Army, when it broke through Perekop.

He was delighted.

"Yes, I know. Then you came on into the Crimea. That's where I'm from."

The young man named several people at army headquar-

ters and in the special department, and several divisional commanders. No, he didn't recall my name.

"Perhaps you heard about me? Yakovlev, a partisan. We joined up with the Sixth Army at Simferopol."

A shiver of excitement went through me. Was this Yakovlev? Of course, I remembered him. In the divisional reconnaissance company we had once curiously examined the photograph of this unimpressive young fellow who was playing catch-as-catch-can with the hangman's noose, the commander of an army that was quietly taking control of Wrangel's rear. Yakovlev! Who of us did not know about Yakovlev, about the legendary crossing of the Yaila ridge in winter, by icy paths known only to wild beasts? His brother had been hanged at Sevastopol.

"The worst time was the winter, but we managed to get away. We used to hide in a cave near Baidary. My wife used to be our go-between with the Sevastopol Committee."

I listened to him with wild excitement. Now we were no longer wrapped in the darkness of the compartment, we were out there among the lands and phantoms of Berezhnevka. He went on to tell me that he had been a militia chief somewhere in Kupyansk District and was now being transferred nearer home, nearer Yalta, and that he and his wife were purposely making the journey through Sevastopol to see the Baidary Gates again. The rumble of the train began to sound like sad and powerful music. Through my sleep I heard Grigory Ivanych creep in, find his greatcoat and go out again—presumably to put it round submissive shoulders at the blustering window.

In my sleep a low barrack aglare with light appeared and I recognized Berezhnevka.

I ran out into the squalid station hall with its dilapidated varnished wooden sofa; Red Army men were at the telephones, all of them with rifles. In the next room soldiers were tramping about with the kind of ominous muttering one hears before a riot. I went into the telegraph office: the same big-nosed, rook-like Armenian was tapping his keyboard, and went on doing so as if to show me that all the life had gone out of those ivory keys.

"Can't get through," he said.

"You needn't," I said, "we're withdrawing."

I galloped after a battalion retreating from death over the ridge of the hill; the lads' faces were grim and ruddy in the sun, a frosty sun that looked down on death.

"Where's HQ platoon?" I asked. My brother was in command of it. No one knew. Behind the fences at the bottom of the hill the battalions we had sacrificed to cover the retreat were still shooting—doomed battalions. I rode past Red Army men lying flat on the ground; they looked like heaps of rags; but they were still alive, still resolute, still ignorant of what had happened. My brother jumped up, ran to the fence and gripped it to climb over.

"Alexei!" I shouted, trying to stop him. "Not that way, Alexei!"

He was hit before he could even look round. I jumped off my horse and removed his cap. The hair on the back of his head was matted into a red pulp, and under it there was a deep hole. And now we were thundering over graves that I had never seen. The gentle rocking had lulled everyone to sleep; and I slept too.

Dawn came beyond Perekop and the Sivash. Warm grey grasses without banks, and birds in the sky—those birds must be able to see the mountains and the blue paradise beyond. At Jankoi the sun suddenly burst upon us and the station walls at once began to shimmer as if it were midday; black velvet shadows lay on the asphalt platforms. They looked as if they had been hosed, and there were roses for sale in the cool. Yes, we were at the gates of the blue paradise. And again we were wrapped in the grey warmth of the steppes, where the breeze, even the morning breeze, comes always from some sun-scorched spot and makes you hang your arms blissfully out of the window, rest your cheek on the hot frame, and dream, and sing scraps of melody... I groped warily within myself for traces of the past night, but it was gone; as yet there was nothing but the lulling rush of the train.

No, I couldn't believe it. It might yet spring on me from some dark corner, an unforgiving shadow that would fall across my world...

The children were awake and chirruping under our bunks. The Yakovlevs' cooing bustle was beginning again. In the distance passed a pale shadow, an echo of a beautiful, inimitable hymn,—the image of a dishevelled woman spy with arrogant eyes, on the eve of the hanging ritual, at Wrangel's HQ ... But wait, we haven't got to the cave yet.

"That's Chatyr-Dag," the young ladies gasped behind me and flew to my window, forgetting themselves in their rapturous delight and pressing up to me with their careless soft-breasted warmth. Behind them Grigory Ivanych's ruddy smiling visage wore a morning pucker.

"Is it much further to Simferopol?" he asked me quietly.

"About an hour to go."

The poor chap would soon have to say goodbye to us.

At the next stop Comrade Yakovlev, commander of an army of partisans, went round the fruit stalls and bought a capful of huge lilac-coloured plums and a big bag of grapes. The fruit was poured into his wife's hospitable lap, from which the whole family took its fill in unhurried silence. The fat blonde, fresh from the toilet, cooled the compartment with her perfume as she peered into a hand-mirror. Beyond the blankets flapping out of the window rose a lime-blue mountain, a dazzling land—the Crimea. The bandits and the night had long since been forgotten, the carriage was sunny, and stuffy enough to make you choke; the men flapped their shirt fronts exhaustedly: if only they could rip them off altogether.

At Simferopol, Grigory Ivanych mysteriously disappeared. His neatly strapped bedding stood together with his suitcase on the edge of the bunk. From the corridor I could see Zhenya's bare neck and slender back in an airy cotton frock, and her bare arms thrust back behind her rebellious curls; she was quarrelling resentfully with the blonde.

"Sonya, my dear, I know perfectly well what I am doing. For Heaven's sake don't lecture me! "

Grigory Ivanych reappeared just before the last bell, looking very sheepish.

"I've booked through to Sevastopol," he said, smiling

guiltily. "I must see those Baidary Gates if they're such a wonderful sight."

"I thought you had seen them before?" the blonde snapped at him jealously.

"That was something different," Grigory Ivanych faltered. "Same kind of name, I've forgotten it now, but not the same place."

The train was enclosed in rocky cliffs towering to the very sky. The gay hot noon was somewhere on their distant grassy truncated heights. Tunnels thundered past like brief nights of merry-making, and with every onrush of darkness came a titillatingly familiar peal of girlish laughter. Already the bells must be ringing at the station to announce the arrival of the Moscow-Sevastopol train. Here it was, our sunny, yearned-for journey's end! We whistled with all the strength of our iron lungs and with a joyful rumble plunged into the last jungle of platforms.

There were spangles of sunlight playing on the polished doors and on the asphalt floor of the empty curtained station hall, with its glaring exit on to the square. Out there everything was red-hot and it made you think of huge, luxuriously breaking waves.

We waited for the twelve-seater Crimea Resort bus, sitting on our luggage like refugees. The Crimea streamed down on us from advertisement hoardings on all sides—white-walled fairy tales flung into the blue, palaces in sunset shadow with sultry flower-gardens and the sea in the background. And straight out of the hoardings came cars and buses driving up to catch the evening train and discharging their loads of sunburned passengers with the rock-dust of the beaches still on their cheeks. What poignant, irreconcilable regrets for those who must go away and leave the sea behind!

While his wife was changing the children's clothes, Comrade Yakovlev talked to me like an old acquaintance. He had long been dreaming of a post in the Crimea. Here he was in his native element, it would be good for the children, his militia service wouldn't give him much trouble—not many incidents around here! And now he and his wife would be able to catch up with their education, as they had always wanted to.

"We'll see your cave today," I said with feigned indifference.

Something terribly important to me depended on his glance, on how he would answer. The young man smiled over my head at the sky. And said nothing.

In the bus the blonde and I got the front seats. I should have liked to have had everyone in front of me. Never mind, now I should see them, just at the right moment, full in the face.

The blonde crumpled into kindness at once and took a delight even in the bare hillocks on the outskirts.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" she exclaimed, her flesh wobbling vigorously with the vibration of the bus.

We rolled down the damp Balaclava valley. There were clouds above and the villages on the right were waist-deep in the green fertile gloom of the dales. The blue paradise was further on. We climbed in spirals higher and higher. The driver changed gear and the engine groaned mournfully, as if the height had gripped its heart, too. The mountains closed in on us, their slopes chalky and curly. We could not go any higher—below was the air, and the stunted scrub and the breath-taking drops of the valleys. Now we should plunge down.

"Ooooh!" Grigory Ivanych squealed in mock panic.

We dropped into emptiness, bushes screeched past raggedly, our lungs emptied and would not fill. I glanced round. Zhenya was clinging to Grigory Ivanych, clutching his arm. She was helpless, she had lost rooms and mummy, everything. Grigory Ivanych's eyes met mine, they saw nothing in their bliss.

We rested in Baidary. The air smelled of approaching evening, there had been some rain and now there would be sun and wind in the pines higher up. The cool had spread a green dew over the grapes on the stalls. We seemed to drive on endlessly. Perhaps it was a dream.

Yes, it was a dream. Here was the gorge through which the partisans had once passed. One more turn and someone's eyes would see what they were searching for and stare at the dark gap under the pines on that sheer green precipice. Now the rounded shoulder of the mountain was withdrawing, a blue line of bushes descending, a hint

of emptiness on the other side of the road. Yes, this was what I was waiting for—I could feel the other man's yearning behind me, sudden and sharp as a knife thrust; I felt a triumphant and terrible shaft of light fall from the past and show up the life there differently with a new glow. But perhaps it was just my imagination. I turned my head to look into the blurred faces of the two sitting behind me. I searched for them, but instead I saw Grigory Ivanych, a ghastly apparition with his blinking smile, and a dozen other eyes madly dilated, then suddenly turning a light blue. We dropped down to the Baidary Gates! The walls of the mountains were flung wide open. And now the driver stopped the bus light-heartedly on the very edge of the abyss, over the blue, heart-gripping emptiness. In front of us and beneath us there was nothing, nothing except the sky and the trembling triumphant blue rising over the world. The sea.

A burst of squealing, whispering, ecstasy in the bus, and the blonde was first to jump to the ground and rush wildly to the edge of the precipice.

"How beautiful! Oh, how beautiful! .."

Grigory Ivanych dashed about with frenzied eyes, pulled a revolver out of his pocket and pretended that he had caught sight of a fox in the gorge below.

"Don't you dare! " Zhenya screamed and ran after him down the road.

Now I must see my comrades, the Yakovlevs. I heard the woman asking the driver if she had time to feed the baby. He said she would. But I could not tear my eyes from the fathomlessly beautiful world that had risen before me. The sea stretched away over the boundless horizon. It had done so yesterday, before we came, and it had done so a thousand years ago in its wild, turbulent stillness. In the green abyss at my feet I imagined towns, a picturesque monastery perched on a needle of rock. The flash of a swallow in mad flight... But still I must see those people.

... And I turned and saw the tenderly bowed head of the woman and the confusion of soft curls on her neck. It had grown cool in the mountains; a coat, remade from a great-coat, was thrown over her shoulders, a coat whose folds still held the breath of those stormy immortal years. The

young man was standing by her with his hands in his pockets, gazing attentively at her breast. His lashes formed a blissful curve. There was the light and the stillness of the sea on them.

I turned away and looked at the infinite wonder created by life out of water and the rocks of eternity. The fat girl in the silk skirt was getting worried and asking everyone what had happened to Zhenya. But who was bothered about Zhenya? Only I could see Grigory Ivanych running up through the bushes on the edge of the fatal blue, laughing and carrying the girl in his arms.

1925

Translated by Robert Daglish

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV

(1891-1940)

The first short stories by Mikhail Bulgakov appeared in print when he was about thirty. During his lifetime, he had a bigger reputation as a dramatist: his play "The Days of the Turbins" (1926) has remained in the repertoire of Moscow's famous Art Theatre. In the 1960s, there was a revival of interest in the Soviet Union and abroad in Bulgakov's prose. His novels "The White Guard" (1925-1927), "The Life of Monsieur de Molière" (1932-1933), "The Master and Margarita" (published in 1966-1967) and others were a significant contribution to the development of Russian prose.

No less refined was Bulgakov's skill as a short-story writer. In 1925, Maxim Gorky told Romain Rolland: "...the young are writing magnificently. Books have already appeared that will go down in literary history, such as Leonov's 'The Badgers', the short stories by Bulgakov and Zoshchenko and others." In his tales, Bulgakov is the pupil of, and successor to, such masters as Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov.

"The Steel Throat" is from a series "Notes of a Young Doctor" (1925-1926). In 1916, Bulgakov obtained "the degree of physician with distinction" and left to serve as a country doctor in what was then the back of nowhere in Smolensk Gubernia. His work demanded total spiritual and physical devotion, "If anyone has ever, like me, spent winter in the snow and summer in the harsh, poor forests for a year and a half without getting away for a single day," wrote Bulgakov of those years, "if anyone has ever torn the wrapper from last week's newspaper with as excited a beating of the heart as that with which the happy lover opens a pale blue envelope, if anyone has ever ridden 18 versts in a sleigh drawn by horses harnessed in tandem to deliver a baby, that person, it must be supposed, will understand me."

More than anything by Bulgakov, "Notes of a Young Doctor" recalls the short stories of Chekhov, with his unconstrained mode of narration, his sympathy and his compassion for human pain.

*THE STEEL THROAT**

And so I found myself alone. Around me was the November darkness with its whirling blizzard; the house was snowed up, the wind howled in the chimneys. I had lived all twenty-four years of my life in a great city and thought that a blizzard howled only in novels. It turned out that it really does howl. The evenings here were uncommonly long, the lamp under the blue shade was reflected in the black window, and I dreamed as I looked at the bright patch shining to the left of me. I dreamed of the nearest town; it was forty versts away. I very much wanted to flee there from my post. There was electricity and there were four doctors whom I could consult; in any case, it was not so terrible. But there was no chance of running away, and at times I realized that it was cowardice. After all, this was what I had studied for at medical school...

"...What if they bring in a woman and she has a difficult birth? Or, let's say, a patient with a strangulated hernia? What am I to do? Be so good as to advise me. Forty-eight days ago, I graduated with distinction, but distinction is one thing and a hernia is another. I once saw the professor perform an operation for hernia. He was doing it, and I was sitting in the operating theatre. That was all..."

A cold sweat often trickled down my spine at the thought of a hernia. Every evening I used to sit in the same position after drinking my tea. Under my left hand lay all the guides on obstetrics. Above, there was a little Doterlein. On the right were various tomes on operative surgery, with illustrations. I grunted, smoked and drank cold black tea.

And then I fell asleep. I remember that night extremely well; it was the 29th of November. I was awakened by a banging at the door. Five minutes later, I was pulling on my trousers, without taking my imploring eyes off the divine books on operative surgery. I could hear the creak of sleigh runners outside; my ears had become uncommonly sensitive. It turned out to be something even more terrifying than a hernia or a breech delivery. They had brought a little girl for me to the hospital at eleven at night.

"A weak little baby girl," the nurse said dully. "She's dying... Please, come to the hospital, Doctor..."

I remember crossing the yard and walking towards the paraffin lamp at the hospital entrance, staring at the winking light as if hypnotized. The reception room was already lit and my whole staff was waiting for me, dressed in hospital overalls. They were Demyan Lukich, my assistant, still young but very competent, and two experienced midwives, Anna Nikolayevna and Pelageya Ivanovna. I was only a twenty-four-year-old doctor; I had graduated and had been put in charge of Nikolskaya Hospital two months previously.

The assistant solemnly threw open the door and the mother appeared. She seemed to fly in, gliding along in her felt boots, and the snow had not yet begun melting on her headscarf. She was carrying a bundle in her arms; it was hissing and whistling rhythmically. Her face contorted, the mother was soundlessly weeping. When she took off her sheepskin coat and headscarf and undid the bundle, I saw a girl of about three. I looked at her and for a time forgot operative surgery, loneliness, my useless burden of academic knowledge, I forgot absolutely everything because of the little girl's beauty. With what could I compare her? Only on chocolate boxes do they paint such children—the hair naturally curly in big rings the colour of almost ripe rye. Enormous blue eyes. Doll-like cheeks. They used to paint angels like that. Except that there was a strange void in the depths of her eyes, and I realized that it was terror: she couldn't breathe. "She'll die in an hour," I thought with complete certainty, and my heart contracted with pain...

Dimples appeared in the little girl's neck every time

she inhaled, her veins swelled and her complexion changed from pink to a delicate lilac. I immediately understood that colour. I immediately knew what was wrong, and the first diagnosis I made was absolutely correct; above all, it was the same as that of the midwives. "The child has membranous croup; her throat is already obstructed by membranes and will soon be completely blocked..."

"How many days has the child been ill?" I asked amid the watchful silence of my staff.

"Five, five," said the mother and looked intently at me, dry-eyed.

"Membranous croup," I said through my teeth to the medical assistant; but to the mother I said, "What d'you think you were doing? What were you waiting for?"

At that moment I heard a tearful voice behind me.

"Five days, sir, five days."

I looked round and saw a silent, round-faced old peasant woman in a headscarf. "It would be a good idea if these old women could just cease to exist," I thought with a dismal foreboding of danger.

"You be quiet, woman," I said. "You're interfering." Then I repeated to the mother, "What were you waiting for? Five days! Eh?"

Suddenly, with an automatic movement, the mother handed the little girl to the older woman and went down on her knees in front of me.

"Give her some drops," she said, and beat her head on the floor. "I'll kill myself if she dies."

"Get up this minute," I answered, "or I shall refuse to speak to you."

Her wide skirt rustling, the mother quickly rose to her feet, took the little girl from the old woman and started rocking it. The old woman began praying to the doorpost. The child was still breathing with a snake-like whistle.

"They all do that," said the assistant. "Ignorant people." As he said this, his moustache went askew.

"You mean she's going to die?" asked the mother, looking at me with what I took to be black fury.

"She is," I said quietly and firmly.

The other woman promptly picked up the hem of her skirt and began wiping her eyes with it.

"Give her something, help her!" the mother screamed at me in an ugly voice. "Give her some drops!"

I could clearly see what I was in for, but I held firm.

"What drops can I give her? You tell me! Your little girl's choking to death, her throat's already blocked. You've tortured the baby for five days fifteen versts away from me. Now what d'you expect me to do?"

"You should know best, master," whined the old woman at my left shoulder in an artificial voice, and I immediately hated her.

"Shut up!" I said to her. I turned to the medical assistant and ordered him to take the little girl. The mother handed the child to the midwife; the girl began struggling and wanted to cry, evidently, but no sound came out. The mother wanted to protect her baby, but we kept her off and I managed to look into the child's throat with the aid of a paraffin lamp. I had never seen diphtheria before, apart from some mild and quickly forgotten cases. There was something bubbling white, torn and ragged filling the throat. The little girl suddenly breathed out and spat in my face, but I didn't fear for my eyes. I was preoccupied with my own thoughts.

"Look here," I said, amazed at my own calm. "This is how it is. It's late. The child's dying. Nothing will save her but an operation."

I was myself appalled at having said it, but I could not have acted otherwise. "What if they agree?" was the thought that flashed through my mind.

"How d'you mean?" asked the mother.

"We'll have to cut open the throat lower down to insert a silver tube and give the child a chance to breathe. Then, perhaps, we'll save her," I answered.

The mother looked at me as if I had taken leave of my senses and shielded the girl from me with her hands. The old woman started babbling again.

"Don't let them! They mustn't cut her! Imagine! Her throat!"

"Go away, woman," I said with hatred. "Camphor!" I ordered the assistant.

The mother wouldn't hand over the child when she saw the syringe, but we explained to her that there was nothing terrible about it.

"Will it help her, maybe?" she asked.

"It won't help in the least."

The mother burst into tears.

"Stop it," I said. I took out my watch and added, "I'm giving you five minutes. If you don't agree after that time, I shall not attempt to do anything."

"I don't agree!" said the mother sharply.

"We don't agree!" added the old woman.

"Just as you wish," I said dully, and thought, "Well, that's that. Less trouble for me. I've said my bit, I've made my offer, and the midwives are looking dumbfounded. These two women have refused, and I'm saved." I had only just thought this when an alien voice spoke up for me. "What's wrong with you? Have you gone mad? How can you refuse consent? You're condemning the child to death. Agree to it! Have you no pity?"

"No, I refuse!" shouted the mother again.

Inwardly I thought, "What am I doing? I'm going to butcher the child." But I said something else. "Come on, hurry up, agree at once! Agree to it! Look, her nails are turning blue already."

"No! No!"

"Very well, take them into the ward and let them sit there awhile."

They were led away along the half-darkened corridor. I could hear the women sobbing and the child wheezing. The medical assistant came back at once and said, "They agree."

My stomach turned to ice, but I said clearly:

"Sterilize lancet, scissors, hooks and probe!"

A minute later, I ran across the yard where the blizzard was whirling like a demon, hurried to my own room and, counting the minutes, snatched up a book, turned the pages and found an illustration of a tracheotomy. It was clear and simple: the throat had been laid bare and the lancet inserted into the windpipe. I began reading the text, but could not understand anything; the words seemed to be dancing in front of my eyes. I had never seen a tracheotomy performed. "Oh, it's too late now," I thought, and looked dismally at the blue shade and the clear drawing; I felt that I had been landed with a difficult and terrible task and, unconscious of the blizzard, I went back to the hospital.

A shade in round skirts attached itself to me in the reception room and a voice began whining:

"Sir, how can you do it, cut the child's throat? Is it possible? She's agreed, the silly woman. But I'm not giving my consent, no, not me. I'll consent to her being given drops, but I won't let you cut her throat."

"Get the old woman out of here!" I shouted, and added in a temper, "You're a silly woman yourself! Yes, you are! But the mother's got some sense! And no one's asking you anyway. Get her out of here!"

A midwife firmly put her arms round the old woman and propelled her out of the ward.

"Ready!" said the medical assistant suddenly.

We went into the small operating-room and through the curtain I could see the shining instruments, the blinding lamp, the oilcloth... For the last time, I went out to the mother, from whom they had been hard put to take the child. I could only hear a husky voice saying, "My husband's not here. He's in town. He'll come back and he'll find out what I did, and he'll murder me."

"He'll murder her," repeated the old woman, looking at me in horror.

"Don't let them into the operating-room!" I roared.

We were left alone in there. The staff, myself, and Lida, the little girl. She was sitting naked on a table and weeping silently. Then they laid her down on the table, washed her throat and wiped it with iodine. Meanwhile I thought, "What am I doing?" It was very quiet. I took the lancet and drew a vertical line on the plump white throat. Not a drop of blood appeared. For a second time, I drew the lancet over the white strip that showed between the parted skin. Again, not a drop of blood. Slowly, trying to remember the illustrations in the books, I began to part the delicate tissues with a blunt probe. This time, dark blood spurted out from somewhere below the incision, instantly flooded the wound and ran down her neck. The assistant began mopping it up with swabs, but the flow didn't stop. Remembering everything I had seen at university, I began pinching the edges of the incision with the tweezers, but it was no use.

I felt cold and my brow was damp with perspiration. I bitterly regretted entering medical school and ending up

in this backwater. In evil despair, I pushed the tweezers in at random somewhere below the wound and clipped them together. The blood stopped flowing immediately. We mopped it up with blobs of gauze; there was the incision before me, clean and absolutely baffling. There was no windpipe anywhere. My incision did not look like those on any of the drawings. Two or three minutes passed during which I poked about mechanically and aimlessly in the incision with the lancet, then with the probe, in search of the windpipe. After two minutes, I despaired of ever finding it. "This is the end," I thought. "Why did I do this? After all, I needn't have offered to operate and Lida would have died peacefully in my ward, but now she'll die with a torn throat, and I'll never be able to prove that she would have died anyway and that I could not have harmed her." The midwife wiped my brow. "Put down the lancet and say I don't know what to do next?" I wondered, and then I imagined the look in the mother's eyes. Again I raised the knife and made a deep cut at random. The tissues divided and suddenly the windpipe appeared in front of me.

"Hooks! " I snapped hoarsely.

The assistant handed them to me. I put in one hook on either side and handed one of them to the assistant. I could see only the greyish rings of the windpipe. I poked the sharp lancet into the windpipe and froze with horror. The windpipe was rising out of the wound. It flashed through my mind that the medical assistant had gone mad. He had started pulling it out. Both midwives gasped behind me. I looked up and realized what had happened; he was fainting because of the lack of air and, instead of releasing the hook, was pulling the windpipe out. "Everything's against me, it's fate," I thought. "We've certainly done Lida in this time"; and I added sternly, "As soon as I get home I'll shoot myself..." At this point, the senior midwife, evidently very experienced, suddenly swooped on the assistant and snatched the hook from him. "Carry on, Doctor," she said through clenched teeth.

The medical assistant slumped to the floor but we were not looking at him. I dug the lancet into the throat, then inserted the silver tube. It slid in easily, but Lida was still not moving. The air was not entering her throat as it

should. I sighed deeply and stopped: there was nothing else I could do. I wanted to ask forgiveness of someone, repent of my irresponsibility in entering medical school. There was a silence. I could see Lida turning blue. I wanted to give it all up and burst into tears, when suddenly Lida shuddered violently, the disgusting clots fountained out of the tube and the air entered her windpipe with a whistle; then she started breathing and set up a howl. Pale and perspiring, the assistant got to his feet again. He looked in stupefied horror at the child's throat and began helping me to stitch it up.

I saw the happy faces of the midwives through the fatigue and the veil of sweat covering my eyes.

"That was a brilliant operation you did, Doctor," said one of them to me.

I thought she was making fun of me and looked at her morosely. Then the door was thrown open and a breath of fresh air blew in. Lida was taken out in a sheet. The mother immediately appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were like those of a wild beast.

"Well?" she asked.

When I heard the sound of her voice, the sweat trickled down my spine and only then did I realize what would have happened if Lida had died on the table. I answered her in a very calm voice, however.

"You can rest. She's alive. She will go on living, I hope. Only, until we take the tube out, she won't speak a word, so don't be scared."

At this point the old woman materialized from somewhere and crossed herself at the door-handle, myself, and the ceiling. I was not angry with her any more. I turned round and gave instructions for Lida to be given a camphor injection and for someone to take turns in watching over her. Then I went back across the yard to my room. I remember the blue light burning in my study, Doterlein was there, the books were scattered about. I went up to the divan and lay down on it in my clothes and at once stopped seeing anything at all. I fell asleep and did not even dream.

A month passed, then another. I had already been through a great deal and there had been worse things than Lida's throat. I had even forgotten it. There was snow everywhere,

and my surgery was getting busier every day. Once—it was already in the new year—a woman came to me in the reception room, leading a little girl so heavily wrapped up that she looked twice her size. The woman's eyes were shining. I looked again and recognized her.

"Ah, Lida! How are things?"

"Everything's fine."

They undid the wrappings round Lida's neck. She was shy and frightened, but I was nevertheless able to lift the girl's chin and have a look. There was a vertical brown scar on her pink neck and two fine horizontal ones from the stitches.

"Excellent," I said. "You needn't come again."

"Thank you, Doctor, thank you," said the mother, and ordered Lida, "Say thanks to Uncle! "

But Lida didn't want to say anything to me.

I never saw her again. I began forgetting her. But my surgery was still getting more and more busy. The day came when I received a hundred and ten patients. We began at nine o'clock in the morning and finished at eight in the evening. I could hardly stand on my feet as I took off my overall.

"You can thank your tracheotomy for that," said the senior midwife.

"D'you know what they say in the villages? That you gave the sick Lida a steel throat instead of a real one and sewed it in. They travel specially to the village to look at her. That's fame for you, Doctor. Congratulations! "

"So she's living with the steel one?" I inquired.

"Yes. But you're great, Doctor. And it's marvellous, the way you do it so calmly."

"Hm, yes... I never get excited," I said, goodness knows why; but I felt so tired I couldn't even feel ashamed and just turned my eyes away. I took my leave of her and returned to my quarters. Heavy snow was settling everywhere, the lamp was burning, and my house was lonely, quiet and solemn. And as I walked towards it, I wanted one thing and one thing only—to sleep.

MIKHAIL SHOLOKHOV

(1905-1984)

Mikhail Sholokhov, State, Lenin and Nobel Prize winner, member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, is known throughout the world for his novels "Quiet Flows the Don" (1928-1940) and "Virgin Soil Upturned" (1932-1960).

"Saying that Sholokhov is one of the biggest modern writers is saying too little," writes Anatoli Ivanov, a Soviet author. "Sholokhov was a genius, one of those people whose life and work shape the moral principles of our civilization."

Sholokhov's books are read everywhere in the world and translated into many languages.

His first book of short stories appeared in print when Sholokhov was just twenty years old. Alexander Serafimovich, already a well-known writer, said in the preface: "Sholokhov's stories make me think of brilliant wild flowers rising in the steppe. You can actually see what he describes so simply and vividly. His language is that colour-

ful language in which the Cossacks speak. The concise narrative is full of life, suspense and truth. His sense of proportion makes the overall effect all the more penetrating. The importance of what he tells us about is enormous. His vision has keenness and grasp. And he knows how to choose the most typical traits out of many."

Two years after the appearance of "Quiet Flows the Don" Sholokhov's name became known to everyone. In this novel he continued the theme he had started in his "Don Tales": the way of life of the Don Cossacks, a relatively wealthy and free caste in tsarist Russia, and the reconstruction of the community's mode of living and world outlook which began after the Great October Socialist Revolution. Like every really great artist, Sholokhov is mercilessly truthful in his description of those dramatic events when a class battle was being fought to the death, and often the arena of the fighting became a homestead, a large family.

*ALIEN BLOOD**

The first snow began to fall during Advent, after the feast of St. Philip. That night the wind blew from across the Don, rustling the withered red grass in the steppe, plaiting the shaggy edges of the snowdrifts and licking bare the knobby backbones of the roads.

Night swaddled the village in a greenish, twilit stillness. Beyond the farmyards the unploughed steppe dozed under a straggling growth of weeds.

At midnight a wolf began to howl in the ravine, the village dogs barked back, and Old Garvila awoke. He sat with his legs dangling from the edge of the stove, clung to the chimney-piece and coughed. And when he had done coughing he spat and groped for his pouch.

Every night, after first cock-crow, the old man would awake and sit smoking and coughing, wheezily loosening the phlegm from his lungs, and in the intervals between these choking fits the thoughts would wend their well-trodden way through his head. And these thoughts were all of his son, who had not come back from the war.

It was his only son, the first and the last. For that son Garvila had worked away hour after hour. When the time came to send him off to the front to fight the Reds, he had taken a pair of oxen to market and on the proceeds bought from a Kalmyk a cavalry horse that was no mere horse but a whirlwind of the steppe. He had taken a saddle out of the family chest and grandfather's bridle with silver trappings. And at parting he had said:

“Well, Petro, I’ve equipped you well. Even an officer would not be ashamed to be seen in an outfit like yours. Serve the Cossack Army as your father served it and mind you don’t disgrace the quiet Don. Your grandfathers and great-grandfathers did their service for the tsars, and so must you!”

And now Old Gavrilas stared through the window, all green with splashes of moonlight, listened to the wind groping in the yard for what did not belong to it, and remembered the days that were gone for ever.

At the send-off party the Cossacks shook the rafters of Gavrilas rush-thatched house with an old Cossack song:

*We fight and our formation never wavers.
Orders we obey and that is right.
At a word from our commander fathers
We ride out to cut and thrust and fight.*

Petro had sat at the table, very drunk and so pale that his face seemed almost blue. And when he drained the final, stirrup cup, he had closed his eyes wearily; but somehow he had managed to mount his horse and sit firm in the saddle. And when he had buckled on his sabre, he had leaned out of the saddle and scooped up a handful of the home soil to take with him. Where did he lie now and what soil had he found in foreign parts to warm his breast?

The old man’s coughing was long and dry, the bellows in his chest wheezed and trumpeted up and down the scale, and in the intervals, when he had cleared his throat and was leaning his bent back against the chimney-piece, his thoughts would wend their familiar, well-trodden way through his head.

A month after Old Gavrilas had seen off his son, the Reds arrived. They broke into time-hallowed Cossack tradition like an invading enemy and turned the old man’s habitual way of life inside out, like an empty pocket. And so, there was Petro on the other side of the Don, zealously earning his sergeant’s stripes in battle, while back in the village Gavrilas fostered and fondled and nursed, just as he had

once nursed the flaxen-haired Petro, an old man's brooding hatred of the Reds, of the upstarts from Moscow.

Just to spite them, he wore his breeches with their red stripes, symbol of Cossack freedom, stitched firmly in black thread to the generously cut woollen cloth. He put his long Cossack tunic with its Guardsman's orange braid and the marks of the sergeant-major's stripes that had once been there. He loaded his chest with the medals and crosses he had won for serving the monarch faithfully and well; and on Sundays he walked to church with his coat open so that all should see them.

The chairman of the Soviet that now ruled this Cossack village said one day on meeting him: "Take off the gongs, Grandpa! That's out of order nowadays."

Old Gavrila flared up like gunpowder.

"Who are you to order me about? Did you give them to me?"

"The man who did has been quartermastering for the worms a good long time, I reckon."

"Let him be then! .. I'll take off nothing! And nor will you, unless you'd strip a dead man."

"You're talking too big, Grandad. I was just giving you a bit of friendly advice. You can go to bed with 'em on for all I care. But what about the dogs? They'll be after those trousers of yours, you know. They've forgotten what your kind look like, they won't recognize their own man."

The insult was bitter as flowering wormwood. He took off his medals, but the resentment grew like a weed in his soul and began to mate with the hatred that was already there.

Now that he had lost his son, there was no one to work and save for. The barns started falling to pieces, the cattle broke up their pens, the rafters of the calfshed that had been ripped open by a storm began to rot. In the stable the mice took over the empty stalls and the reaper grew rusty in its shed.

Most of the horses had gone with the Cossacks, the rest had been commandeered by the Reds, and the only one that they had left behind in exchange, a knock-kneed, long-eared nag, had been taken for next to nothing in autumn by Makhno's anarchists. In compensation they had left Gavrila a pair of British puttees.

"Let ours be yours!" the Makhno machine-gunner proclaimed with a wink. "Enrich yourself, Grandpa, out of our pockets."

All that he had saved and hoarded over the years went to rack and ruin. He could not lift a finger to do anything; but in the spring, when the fallow steppe lay at his feet in languorous submission, the earth tempted the old man and at night he heard its compelling silent call. Unable to resist, he harnessed his oxen to the plough and furrowed the steppe with steel and sowed the insatiable womb of the black earth with good wheat.

Cossacks came home from the sea and from across the sea, but no one knew what had happened to Petro. Men had served in different regiments and fought in different parts—Russia is a big place—and it was said that Petro's own regiment had been wiped out to the last man in an engagement with the Reds' detachment somewhere on the Kuban.

Gavrila hardly ever spoke to his wife about their son.

At night he would hear her crying and snuffling in her pillow.

"What is it, old woman?" he would say, clearing his throat.

And she would wait a little while before responding.

"It must be the fumes from the stove. I've got a headache."

And he would pretend not to know what the real trouble was.

"Why don't you drink some pickle-water? I'll go down to the cellar and get you some."

"Go to sleep, man. It'll pass."

And once again the stillness would spread its invisible web over the house. And the moon would stare in arrogantly through the window, enjoying the sight of another's grief, the sorrow that breaks a mother's heart.

But still they waited and hoped for their son's return. When Gavrila decided to have some sheepskin dressed, he said to his wife: "We'll manage as we are, but what will Petro wear when he comes home? Winter's on the way, we must make him a coat."

So they had a coat made to fit Petro and put it away

in the chest. They also made him a pair of working boots, for cleaning out the cattle-shed. The old man took good care of his own fine blue uniform and sprinkled it with tobacco, to save it from the moth. And when they killed a lamb, Gavrila made a tall hat out of the skin and hung it on a nail. And when he came in from the yard the sight of it would bring him up short, as if he were expecting Petro to step smilingly from the front room with a "Well, Dad, is it cold outside?"

About two days later he went out just before dusk to clean the cattle-shed. He threw some hay into the mangers and was about to draw water from the well when he remembered that he had left his mittens indoors. So he went back to the house, opened the door and there he saw his old wife kneeling on the floor by the bench, holding the hat that Petro had never worn to her breast and nursing it like a baby.

Everything went dark before his eyes. He flung himself at her like a wild beast, knocked her to the floor and, swallowing back the foam that rose to his lips, croaked: "Stop it! Stop it, you hag! What d'ye mean by it?"

He snatched the hat away from her, threw it into the chest and fastened the lock. Afterwards he noticed that the old woman's left eye had begun to twitch and her mouth was twisted a little to one side.

The days and weeks flowed by like the waters of the Don, which in autumn are clear, green and always swift.

One day the creeks froze. A belated flock of wild geese flew over the village, and in the evening the neighbour's boy came over with a message for Gavrila. The boy crossed himself hastily in front of the icon.

"Good-day to you."

"Praise the Lord."

"Have you heard, Grandad? Prokhor Likhovidov has come back from Turkey. He was in the same regiment as your Petro."

Gavrila almost ran down the lane, breathless from coughing and hurrying. But Prokhor was not at home. He had gone away to a neighbouring hamlet to see his brother, promising to return the following day.

There was no sleep for Gavrila that night. He tossed restlessly on the stove, wide awake.

Before daybreak he lighted a rush lamp and started mending his felt boots.

Morning—a pallid weakling—poured a feeble dawn from the blue-grey east. The moon was still dozing in the middle of the sky, not even strong enough to take the last few steps to a cloud where it could shelter for the day.

Before breakfast-time Gavril glaced out of the window.

"Prokhor's coming!" he said, for some reason in a whisper.

The man who entered the room did not look like a Cossack at all, his whole appearance was that of a stranger. On his feet he wore a squeaky pair of iron-tipped British boots. An oddly cut overcoat, evidently not his own, hung baggily from his shoulders.

"Greetings, Gavril Vasilich!"

"The Lord be praised, soldier! Come in and sit down."

Prokhor took off his cap, greeted the old woman and sat down on a bench in the front corner.

"What weather we're having! This wind has snowed us up. You can't get through the drifts."

"Aye, the snow's early this year. In the old days the cattle would still be out grazing at this time of year."

There was a painful silence.

Gavril, outwardly composed and firm, said: "You've aged, lad, in foreign parts."

Prokhor smiled. "Nothing there to make a chap any younger, Gavril Vasilich!"

The old woman tried to put in a word:

"Our Petro..."

"Be quiet, woman!" Gavril snapped. "Give a man a chance to recover after being out in the frost. You'll have time to find out what you want to know."

He turned back to his guest.

"Well, Prokhor Ignatich, how has life been treating you?"

"Nothing to boast of. Limped home like a dog with its backside out of joint, and lucky to have managed that."

"I see... So life was bad with the Turks, was it?"

"Hardly kept body and soul together." Prokhor drummed on the table with his fingers. "But you've aged

a good deal yourself, Gavril Vasilich. That's pretty good sprinkling of grey you've got on your head... How do you find life under Soviet rule?"

"I'm waiting for my son, waiting for him to come back and feed us old folk."

Gavril smiled wryly.

Prokhor hastily averted his eyes. Gavril noticed this and asked straight out: "Where is Petro?"

"You mean you haven't heard?"

"We have heard many different tales."

Prokhor twisted the dirty fringe of the table-cloth in his fingers. It was some minutes before he answered.

"In January, I think... Yes, in January, our squadron was stationed near Novorossiisk. That's a town on the sea. And we were carrying on as usual like..."

Gavril leaned forward. "Is he dead?" he asked in a low whisper.

Prokhor said nothing and kept his eyes down, as though he had not heard the question.

"Well, we were stationed there and the Reds were trying to break through to get to the mountains and link up with the Greens. So the squadron commander puts him—your Petro, that is—in charge of a patrol... Our commander was Junior Captain Senin... Well, then it happened..."

There was a thud by the stove as a metal cooking-pot fell to the floor. The old woman was feeling her way with outstretched arms towards the bed, her throat bursting with the cry she dared not utter.

"Don't howl!" Gavril rapped threateningly. He planted his elbows firmly on the table and looked Prokhor straight in the eyes.

"Tell us the rest, then," he said slowly and wearily.

"They cut him down!" Prokhor burst out, turning pale, and stood up, groping on the bench for his cap. "They cut Petro down... killed him... We had halted near a wood to give the horses a rest. He had just loosened his saddle girth and Reds came at us out of the wood..." The words seemed to choke Prokhor and he crushed his cap with trembling hands. "Petro grabbed his saddle-bow and down it went under the horse's belly... She went off like a shot and he couldn't hold her, so ... so he was left behind... And that was that!"

"But suppose I don't believe this?" Garvila said very slowly and clearly.

Prokhor walked hurriedly to the door without looking round.

"Just as you like, Gavril Vasilich, but it's true. I'm telling you the truth, the naked truth... I saw it happen with my own eyes."

"But suppose I don't want to believe it?!" Gavril gasped out, going purple in the face. His eyes were bloodshot and full of tears. He tore open his shirt and lumbered with hairy chest bare towards the frightened Prokhor, groaning and throwing back his head. "Kill my own son?! Our only help! My Petro?! You lying son-of-a-bitch! You're lying, d'ye hear?! Lying! I won't believe it..."

That night he threw his coat over his shoulders, went out into the yard and crunched through the snow in his felt boots to the threshing yard. He stood by a rick.

The wind was blowing from the steppe, carrying powdery flakes of snow; a black, forbidding darkness was heaped under the bare cherry-trees.

"Son! " Gavril called softly. He waited a little and without moving or turning his head called again: "Petro! .. My son! .."

Then he lay down with his face in the trampled snow by the rick and closed his eyes in grief.

There had been talk in the village of the requisitioning of grain, and of the bandits that were moving up country from the lower reaches of the Don. At village meetings the Executive Committee whispered the news among themselves, but Old Gavril had never set foot on the rickety committee-house steps and had never felt the need. So there was much that he did not hear and that he knew nothing about. It seemed monstrous to him when the chairman called on him one Sunday after morning service, accompanied by three men in skimpy tan-coloured sheepskins and carrying rifles.

The chairman shook hands with Gavril, then let him have it, like a blow on the head from behind:

"Come on, Grandad, own up! Have you any grain?"

"What d'ye think we live on—nought but the holy spirit?"

"Don't snarl! Tell us where your grain is."

"In the barn, of course."

"Show us."

"Would you be kind enough to tell me what business you have with my grain?"

A big fair-haired fellow—a high-up of some sort, by the look of him—stamped his feet in the cold and said: "We're collecting all surpluses for the state. Food requisitioning. Haven't you heard about it, Dad?"

"And suppose I won't give you any?" Gavril said hoarsely, swelling with anger.

"We'll take it without asking! "

The chairman and his men whispered among themselves, and climbed into the corn bins, leaving slots of snow from their boots on the clean, golden-brown wheat. The big blonde man lit a cigarette and made his decision.

"Leave enough for sowing, for their own needs and take the rest." With a proprietary glance he assessed the amount of grain and turned to Gavril. "How much land are you going to sow?"

"Not a damn thing! " Gavril spat out, his face twisting violently and he began to cough. "Take it and a pox on you! Rob us of all we have! It's yours! .."

"Steady there! Steady, Grandad! Are you mad?! " the chairman remonstrated, flapping his mitten at Gavril.

"Choke yourselves on other people's goods! .. Eat till you burst! "

The fair-haired man flicked a wet icicle off his moustache, gave Gavril a shrewd, ironic glance, and said with a calm smile: "Hold your horses, Grandad! Shouting won't help. What's all the row about, has someone trodden on your tail?" Then his brows came together and his voice suddenly hardened: "Don't let your tongue run away with you! If it's too long you'd better tie it to your teeth! The penalty for agitation..." He slapped his yellow holster slung from his belt without finishing the sentence and said a little more gently: "Mind you deliver it today."

The old man did not exactly take fright, but that firm, decisive voice knocked the wind out of him and made him

realize that there really was nothing to be gained by shouting. With a dismissive flip of the hand he walked back to the porch. But before he had covered half the distance he was brought up short by a wild yell:

"Where're these requisitioners?! "

Gavrila swung round. On the other side of the fence a rider had reared his prancing horse. The feeling that something extraordinary was afoot made Gavrila's knees tremble. Before he could open his mouth, the horseman, seeing the men standing outside the barn, backed his horse sharply and with an imperceptibly swift movement of the hand ripped the rifle from his shoulder.

The shot cracked resonantly and in the stillness that for a brief instant fell upon the yard the bolt clicked twice and the cartridge case flew out with a whirr.

The first moment of stupefaction passed. The fair-haired man flattened himself against the door-jamb and with agonizing slowness his jerking hand drew the revolver from his holster. The chairman scuttled across the yard towards the threshing floor, hopping and squatting like a hare. One of the requisitioners dropped on one knee and emptied the magazine of his carbine at the black sheepskin cap bobbing above the fence. A volley of shots swept the yard. Gavrila wrenched his feet out of the snow and pounded heavily to the porch. Looking round, he saw the three men in tan-coloured coats stumbling through the snowdrifts towards the threshing floor as a bunch of horsemen poured in through the hospitably open gates.

The leader, in a Kuban hat and riding a bay stallion, was crouched over his saddle-bow and whirling a sabre above his head. The streaming scarves of his white hood flashed in front of Gavrila like swan's wings and the snow from the horse's hooves spattered in his face.

As he sank back weakly against the carved post of the porch, Gavrila saw the bay leap a fence and rear beside a partly used rick of barley straw while its rider leaned out of the saddle and hewed with cross strokes at a writhing requisitioner.

From the threshing floor came the sound of scuffling and a long, sobbing scream. A moment later a single shot rang out. The pigeons, which had only just settled on the

roof of the barn after the first burst of firing, swept into the sky again like a violet shower of buckshot. The horse-men on the threshing floor dismounted.

Meanwhile a great clangour had broken out over the village. Pasha—the village simpleton—had climbed the bell-tower and in his foolishness was tugging all the bell-ropes at once, sounding an Eastertide ring-a-ding-dong instead of an alarm.

The leader, in the Kuban hat, strode up to Gavril, his white hood thrown back over his shoulders. His perspiring face was twitching and there was a trickle of saliva at the drooping corners of his mouth.

“Got any oats?”

Gavril raised himself with difficulty from the steps. Overwhelmed by what he had seen, he could scarcely move his tongue.

“Are you deaf, you old devil?! Have you any oats, I asked. Bring us a sackful! ”

But before they had time to lead their horses to the feeding-trough, another rider dashed in at the gate.

“To horse! Infantry coming down the hill...”

With a curse the leader bridled his steaming, sweat-bathed mount and paused only to rub snow on the cuff of his right sleeve, which was thickly smeared with purplish red.

As the five men rode out of the yard Gavril noticed the blood-stained coat of the fair-haired food-requisitioner strapped to the saddle of the last rider.

The sound of firing in the thorny ravine beyond the hill continued until evening. Stillness skulked in the village like a beaten dog. The blue dusk was beginning to fall when Gavril mustered enough courage to go out to the threshing floor. As he stepped through the open wicket gate he saw the chairman slumped where the bullet had caught him, over one of the hurdles. His arms hung down, as though reaching for his cap, which had dropped off and lay on the ground beyond the hurdle.

On the chaff-sprinkled snow not far from the rick lay the three requisitioners in a row, stripped to their under-clothes. As he stared down at them, Gavril’s horror-

stricken heart no longer felt the hatred that had dwelt there in the morning. It seemed unreal, a horrible dream, that on his threshing floor, which his neighbour's goats were always plundering for wisps of straw, there should now lie these butchered bodies with the odour of death and decay already rising from them and the half-frozen pools of frothy blood.

The fair-haired man lay with his head turned awkwardly sideways and but for that head, firmly embedded in the snow, one might have thought he was resting, so carelessly were his legs crossed one over the other.

The second man, with a black moustache and some of his front teeth missing, was lying with his back arched and his head pulled into his shoulders, his lips drawn back in an unrelenting snarl of fury. The third, who had plunged head-long into the straw, seemed to be swimming across the snow, so much strength and effort was there in the death-stilled sweep of his arms.

Gavrila bent over the fair-haired one, peering into his ashen face, and gave a start of pity. Before him lay not a fierce, prickly-eyed food-requisitioning commissar, but a lad of nineteen. The hoar-frost was forming round his lips under the yellow fluff of his moustache and the only line on his face was a deep, sad furrow of sternness across the brow.

Aimlessly Gavrila let his hand fall on the lad's bare chest—and drew back in surprise. Through the icy chill his palm had sensed a dying warmth...

His old wife gasped and backed away to the stove, crossing herself, when Gavrila staggered in groaning with the stiff blood-blackened body on his back.

He laid the body on the bench, washed it with cold water and began rubbing the chest, arms and legs with a rough woollen sock. He rubbed until he was tired, till the sweat broke out on his forehead. Then he placed his ear to that repellently cold chest and was just able to hear the muffled, faltering beat of the heart.

For three days and four nights he had been lying in the front room, yellow and pale as a corpse. A purple, blood-

encrusted scar ran across his forehead and cheek, and his tightly bandaged chest heaved under the blanket, taking breath with a wheezy gurgle.

Every day Gavrilā parted his lips with a cracked and calloused finger and prised open the clenched teeth with the tip of a knife, while his wife poured warm milk and mutton broth into his mouth through a reed.

On the morning of the fourth day a flush appeared in the lad's cheeks and by noon his face was flaming like a hawthorn bush set on fire by frost; his whole body began to shake violently and cold, sticky sweat oozed forth under his shirt.

From that moment he began to murmur in delirium, trying to rise from the bed. Gavrilā and the old woman took turns to watch over him day and night.

Through the long winter nights, when the east wind from across the Don stirred the black sky and spread the cold clouds low over the village, Gavrilā would sit at the wounded man's bedside with his head sunk in his hands, listening to him muttering some incoherent tale in that strange broad accent of his. He would stare at the dark triangle of sunburn on his chest, at the closed blue lids, rimmed with horse-shoes of grey, and when a long drawn-out moan or a hoarse command of foul abuse poured from the faded lips and the face became contorted with pain and anger Gavrilā felt the hot tears welling in his throat, and at such moments pity came unbidden.

Gavrilā noticed that with every day, with every sleepless night at the sick man's bedside his wife grew paler and more withered; he noticed the tears on her furrowed cheeks and understood, or rather sensed with his heart, that her love for her dead son Petro, buried deep within her with the tears she had not been able to shed, had spread like wildfire to this motionless, death-kissed boy, another woman's son...

The commander of a regiment that passed through the village came to the house one day. He left his horse with an orderly at the gate and ran up the steps to the porch with clanking sword and spurs. In the front room he took off his cap and for a long time stood silent by the bed. Pale shadows stirred on the wounded man's face, a trickle

of blood oozed from his lips, which were charred black with fever. The commander shook his prematurely grey head and stared mistily past Gavrila, evading the old man's eyes.

"Look after our comrade, old man! " he said.

"We shall! " Gavrila replied firmly.

The days lengthened into weeks. The Epiphany came and went. On the sixteenth day the lad opened his eyes and Gavrila heard a cracked voice, thin as a spider's web, say:

"Is that you, old man?"

"It is."

"Made a nice mess of me, did they?"

"Christ save us! "

Gavrila fancied that in that brief, transparent glance he caught a glimpse of simple, unmalicious humour.

"What about the other lads?"

"Them... We buried them on the square."

The lad's fingers moved over the blanket and without saying he shifted his glance to the rough-timbered ceiling.

"What is your name?" Gavrila asked.

The blue-veined eyelids dropped wearily.

"Nikolai."

"Well, we'll call you Petro... We had a son called Petro," Gavrila explained.

He thought for a moment and was about to ask something else, but he heard the sound of steady breathing, through the nostrils, and, holding out his arms for balance, tiptoed away from the bed.

Life returned to him slowly, reluctantly. The following month he managed with an effort to lift his head from the pillow; bed-sores appeared on his back.

As the days went by Gavrila sensed with dismay that he was becoming more and more deeply attached to the new Petro, while the image of the first, his own son, was fading, growing dim, like the gleam of the setting sun on the mica windows of his cottage. He tried to revive his former grief and anguish, but what had once been so near was drifting farther and farther away, and it made him feel

awkward and ashamed... He would go out and spend hours pottering in the yard, but when he remembered that his wife had all this time been sitting unremittingly at Petro's bedside he would be overcome by jealousy. Going indoors, he would stand silently at the head of the bed, straighten the coverlet with his stiff fingers and, feeling the old woman's angry glance upon him, sit down on the bench and keep quiet.

The old woman fed Petro on marmot fat and an infusion of herbs, picked in spring, in the full bloom of May. Whether because of this or because youth had got the better of decay, the wounds healed, the lad's cheeks filled out and reddened with fresh blood and only the right forearm, where the bone had been splintered, failed to mend properly; evidently its working days were over.

In the second week of Lent, however, Petro managed to sit up in bed without assistance. He seemed surprised at his own strength and his face broke into a broad, incredulous smile.

That night in the kitchen the old man's voice came amid coughs from the stove:

"You asleep, old one?"

"What's the matter?"

"Our boy will be getting up soon... You'd better get Petro's breeches out of the chest tomorrow... Get a full outfit ready for him... The lad's got nothing to wear."

"I know. I've got them out already."

"You're quick, woman! .. Did you get his coat out too?"

"And why not? Is the boy to go about naked?"

Gavrila turned over once or twice on the stove and was about to doze off, when he remembered something else and raised his head triumphantly:

"What about the hat? You forgot the hat, I'll be bound, you old goose?"

"Oh, leave me alone! You've passed by it forty times without seeing it. It's been hanging on yon nail since yesterday!"

Gavrila coughed in vexation and fell silent.

A bustling spring was already bestirring the Don. The ice looked dark and worm-eaten and was porously swollen.

The hillsides were bare. The snow had retreated from the steppe into the ravines and gulleys, the far bank was

basking in sunny flood-water, and from the steppe the wind wafted the bitter fragrance of reviving wormwood.

It was the end of March.

"I'll get up today, Father! "

Though all the Red Army men who had crossed the threshold of Gavril's house had called him father, when they saw his grey hair, Gavril noticed a special warmth in this voice. It may only have seemed so to him, or perhaps Petro really had said the word with filial affection, but Gavril's face went a rich crimson; he began to cough and, concealing his embarrassed joy, muttered:

"You've had over two months of it... It's about time, Petro."

Petro hobbled stiffly out on to the porch and almost choked from the abundance of air that the wind poured into his lungs. Gavril supported him from behind, while his old wife fussed round the porch, wiping away a few quiet ordinary tears on her apron.

As he hobbled past the raggedly thatched barn their adopted son Petro asked: "Did you take in the grain after all?"

"I did," Gavril grunted unwillingly.

"You did the right thing, Father! "

And again the word "Father" warmed Gavril's heart. Every day Petro hobbled about the yard, leaning on a stick. And from everywhere, from the threshing floor, from the shed, wherever he happened to be, Gavril watched his new son with anxious, searching eyes afraid that he might trip and fall.

They spoke little to each other, but a simple, affectionate relationship grew up between them.

About two days after Petro had gone out for the first time, at bed-time, as he was making himself comfortable on the stove, Gavril asked: "Where d'ye hail from, Son?"

"From the Urals."

"Peasant stock, eh?"

"No, working class."

"Now how'd that be? Did you have a trade of some kind? What were you? A cobbler? Or a cooper, eh?"

"No, Father, I worked at a factory. At an iron foundry. I grew up there."

"And how did you come to be collecting grain?"

"They sent me from the army."

"What were you then? One o' their commanders?"

"Yes, Father."

The next question was hard to ask, but it was what he had been leading up to.

"So you're a Party man then?"

"I'm a Communist," Petro replied, smiling openly.

And that frank, open smile swept away Gavril's fear of that foreign-sounding word.

The old woman, who had been waiting for a chance to speak, asked quickly: "Have you a family, Petro dear?"

"Not a soul in the world, I'm all alone, like the moon in the sky! "

"Are your parents dead?"

"I was only about seven, just a kid... Father was killed in a drunken fight. Mother makes her living on the streets somewhere..."

"Oh, the bitch! So she left you when you were only a poor little mite, did she?"

"She went off with a labour contractor, and I grew up at the factory."

Gavril let his legs dangle from the stove and for a long time he was silent. Then he began to speak very clearly and slowly.

"Well, Son, if you have no family, you can stay with us... We had a son once, it's after him we call you Petro... But that was a long time ago and now there's only us two old folk to keep ourselves company... We've feared for your life so long; I reckon that's why we've taken to you like this. You may be of different blood, but our hearts ache for you, same as if you were our own... Stay with us, lad! We'll live on the land together, it's good land here on the Don, rich and generous... We'll set you up and find a wife for you... I've had my life, you can take over the farm. All I ask you is to respect our old age and not refuse us a place at your table before we die... Don't leave us, old folk, Petro..."

A cricket behind the stove kept up a cracked, monotonous chirping.

The shutters moaned in the wind.

"We've been looking out for a wife for you, the old woman and I!" Gavrilá winked with forced cheerfulness, but his lips trembled and broke into a pitifully twisted smile.

Petro stared down at the chipped and broken floor, his left hand tapping on the bench. It came at intervals, a low, anxious sound. Tap-tap-tap! tap-tap-tap! tap-tap-tap!

Evidently he was considering his reply. When he had made up his mind, he stopped tapping and raised his head with a jerk.

"I'll stay with you, Father, gladly, but I won't make much of a worker. My right arm isn't mending properly, damn it! But I'll do what work I can. I'll stay for the summer, then we'll see."

"And then, maybe you'll stay for good!" Gavrilá concluded.

The spinning-wheel burst into a joyous hum at the push of the old woman's foot, purring with happiness as it wound the fluffy wool on to the spindle.

Perhaps it was singing a lullaby or promising a life of plenty with its drowsy, rhythmical drumming—who can say?

Spring was followed by sun-scorched days, curly and grey with the rich steppeland dust. Fair weather set in. The Don, as rebellious as ever, was ridged high with combing waves. Floods watered the outlying farmsteads. The far bank, all green and greyish-white, loaded the air with the honey fragrance of flowering poplars; in the meadows a lake, strewn with the fallen petals of wild apple blossom, shone rosy as the dawn. At night the summer lightning flashed girlish glances across the sky and the nights were as brief as the fiery flicker of the lightning. The oxen had no time to recover from their long days of toil. The cattle grazing on the common pasture had moulted and their ribs showed under their patchy skin.

Gavrilá and Petro lived together in the steppe for a week. They ploughed, harrowed and sowed, and spent the nights under the cart, sharing the same sheepskin, but Gavrilá said nothing of how firmly, as though by an invisible chain, he was bound to his new son. Fair-haired, gay, hard-working,

he overshadowed the image of the other Petro, the one that was dead. Gavril thought of him less and less. And work left him no time for memories.

But the days crept by with thievish tread. Soon it was mowing time.

One morning Petro spent a long time tinkering with the mower. He amazed Gavril by the skill with which he sharpened the blades in the forge and made fresh sails to replace the old, broken ones. He passed all day in his labours and, when it began to grow dusk, went off to the Executive Committee office to attend a meeting. While he was away Gavril's wife, who had been down to fetch water, came in with a letter. The envelope was old and greasy. It was addressed, care of Gavril, to Comrade Kosykh, Nikolai.

Troubled by vague forebodings, Gavril fingered the envelope with those smudgy letters scrawled across it in ink pencil.

He held it up to the light and stared at it, but the envelope guarded its secret jealously and Gavril felt an involuntary surge of anger against this letter that had disturbed his customary peace of mind.

It occurred to him to tear it up, but after a little thought he decided to pass it on. He met Petro at the gate with the news.

"There's a letter for you, Son."

"For me?"

"Aye. Go in and read it."

Indoors Gavril lit the lamp and with watchful, probing eyes scanned Petro's joyful face as he read the letter. Eventually his impatience got the better of him.

"Where's it from?"

"The Urals."

"And who wrote it?" the old woman asked curiously.

"My friends at the foundry."

Gavril was on his guard at once.

"And what do they write about?"

The light went out of Petro's eyes and he answered reluctantly: "They want me back at the foundry. They're going to start it up again. It's been idle since 1917."

"But... Will you go?" Gavril asked dully.

"I don't know."

Petro grew gaunt and sallow. At night Gavrilā heard him sighing and turning over in his bed. And after much heart-searching he realized that life in the village was not for Petro, that it was not his calling to ruffle the black earth of the steppe with the plough. The foundry which had nurtured Petro, would sooner or later claim him back, and once again the barren joyless days would hobble by in black procession. Brick by brick Gavrilā would have torn down that hated foundry, razed it to the ground, so that the weeds and nettles might grow there and shed their seed upon it!

On the third day of the mowing, when they came back to the camp for a drink of water, it was Petro who spoke first.

"I can't stay, Father! I must go back to the foundry. It's pulling me, twisting my heartstrings..."

"Don't you like the life here?"

"That's not it... The foundry belongs to us. When Kolchak advanced, we held out for ten days. Kolchak's men strung up nine of our men as soon as they took the place. And now the workers who came back from the army are trying to get the foundry going again. They're pretty near starving, and their families, too, but they're doing their best... How can I stay here? Do you think my conscience will let me?"

"What help can you be? Your right arm's no good."

"That's a funny way of talking, Father. They need everyone they can get."

"Well, I'm not stopping you. Go, if you like! " Gavrilā replied, with a show of cheerfulness. "Pretend to the old woman you'll be coming back. Say you just want to live there a bit, then come back to us. She'll miss you too much otherwise, it'll be the end of her... You're all we have, y'know..."

And still clinging to a last hope, he went on in a hoarse, panting whisper: "Maybe you really will come back, eh? Won't you have pity on our old age?.. Won't you?.."

The cart creaked, the tugging oxen plodded on, the crumbling chalk rustled softly as it sprinkled off the wheels.

Near a roadside cross the track, which had been winding along the Don, turned left. From the turn there could be seen the churches of the district centre and the fanciful green patchwork of orchards and vegetable gardens.

Gavrila had been talking throughout the journey, trying to keep a smile on his face.

"Some girls got drowned in the Don at this spot three years ago. That's what the cross is for." He pointed his whipstock at the forlorn little roof over the cross. "And this is where we say goodbye. The road don't go any further, there's been a landslide on the hill. It's about a verst from here to the village. You'll manage that on foot."

Petro adjusted the bag of provisions that hung from his belt and climbed down from the cart. Stifling his sobs with an effort, Gavrila flung his whip to the ground and held out his trembling arms.

"Goodbye, my boy! The sun won't rise for us without you..." His tearful, anguished face puckered and he suddenly raised his voice to a shout: "Sure you haven't forgotten your pies, Son? The pies the old woman baked for you... Got them, have you? Well, goodbye! Goodbye, laddie! .."

Petro set off, limping and almost running, along the narrow verge of the road.

"Come back! " Gavrila called, clutching at the side of the cart.

"He never will! " sobbed a silent voice in his heart.

For the last time that dear fair head showed up round the bend, for the last time Petro waved his cap, and where his feet had trodden the wind foolishly began to stir and eddy the smoky-white dust.

1926

Translated by Robert Daglish

VSEVOLOD IVANOV

(1895-1963)

Vsevolod Ivanov was born in Siberia into the family of a poor schoolteacher. Obsessed by a dream of going to the "fabulous land" of India, he drifted around a great deal in his youth and changed many jobs. The observations and impressions accumulated during these years were more than ample for Ivanov's creative life. He welcomed the Revolution of 1917 with joy while working as a typesetter in Omsk. "We were profoundly and solemnly convinced," he recalled, "that justice was triumphing for ever, that so easily defeated an enemy would never recover. We had great faith in people. Misery and grief had disappeared from our midst forever."

In 1921, Ivanov moved to Petrograd, where his professional career began, marked by meetings and subsequent friendship with Gorky. His first short stories had been published in 1915. It was 1921, however, that saw the birth of a highly original talent: "Partisan Stories" ("The Partisans", "Armoured Train 14-69", "Coloured Winds"), a short novel "The Return of Buddha", the novel "Blue Sands", and many short stories. The basic theme of all his works was the revolution in Siberia with its uniqueness, its fantastic mixture of advanced revolutionary ideas of the 20th century and primitive 17th-century ways of the taiga people. According to A. Gladkovskaya, a Soviet author-

ity on V. Ivanov's work, "the poetic vision of the world in Ivanov does not exclude scenes of cruelty, blood and death. But it is joyful nevertheless. The colourfully textured, miraculous carpet that he seems to throw over reality is an affirmation of life. The paeon to life becomes a paeon to the Revolution, for with Ivanov the Revolution is a function of life itself, its most beautiful fruit."

His skill as a writer reached its height in the short stories of the 1920s. As Maxim Gorky wrote to him on 13 December 1926, "Allow me to congratulate you, you have begun writing excellently, my dear sir! This doesn't mean that you were writing badly before, but it certainly means that you were writing worse. I don't remember any of my generation of writers making such a step towards true mastery as you have succeeded in making, from 'Blue Sands' to your latest short stories."

Vsevolod Ivanov was present at the very birth of Soviet literature. He was one of the first explorers of that boundless continent. On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, Alexander Fadeyev wrote to him: "We are learning from the first Soviet writers who were our predecessors; we loved you, were enthralled by you, and we read you incessantly. I could say that you had built the road for us, had it not been a road to the skies."

*THE VALLEY OF KARA-SOR**

I

Frenziedly shaking the foam off their bits, our horses galloped up the hill.

The hills became a little higher as they ran right down to the lake and broke off in small crags reminiscent of saddles.

Beyond the crags, on the left, were the salt flats of the shores. On the right, on the highest hill, stood several yurts. From a distance it was possible to discern herds of skinny horses and miserable doors—the *yessyk* of tightly plaited rushes. The *yessyk* of the rich is made of lavishly embroidered felt.

"They're coming," said Yegor.

I looked to the left.

Silken and patterned, like Arab weaving, the dust was winding over the horizon.

"Yes," I replied, "they're coming".

We dismounted and headed for the yurts to drink milk.

Now let me say a few words about Yegor Khvosch and how I ended up with him in the Valley of Kara-Sor, in the Hungry Steppe, on the Kan-Jol, which means "Road of Blood."

Our detachment was guarding the approaches to Tyumen. The white Czechs had taken Petropavlovsk, butchered the Revolutionary Committee and mowed down the Red Guards. Our detachment was decimated and tired; we were expecting the end. The peasants were hostile, our horses kept disappearing and the mobilized carters were deserting us.

The commissar of the detachment was Geidans, a Lett.

He is now in the Ukraine. He was a huge albino with unusually transparent eyes, so that he often seemed to have tears instead of eyes. He was very strict, always carried the detachment's money in a leather knapsack and read Marx at the campfire. I saw him most often with "The Civil War in France". He had become a Marxist recently and was mastering the science with great effort. As he read, it was almost as if he was tearing his own guts out.

We were proud of our discipline.

One day, I was sitting beside Geidans and trying to question him about herbiculture (I was then interested, I don't remember why, in clover cultivation in Siberia), and I was getting nowhere—he disliked talking about his agricultural work. He was a colonist, and his father had owned an enormous farm, ruined, incidentally, by his own son's detachment. Someone came up and announced that a very fat man was asking for Comrade Geidans. We had certain grounds then for not liking fat people (alas, many of us have put on weight ourselves now), and Geidans said with all his albino severity:

"Bring him here."

And we saw the body! Oh, that body! It was like a haystack, incredibly fat and smooth. The hands were even, pink and so fat that you didn't want to look at anything else. The permanently trembling mouth was moist, pink and flabby.

"Where did they pick you up?" asked Geidans.

The giant looked at us from on high and then suddenly sat down with us.

"They didn't pick me up, I came of my own accord," he replied with a mouth that wobbled like meat jelly. His voice was also fat and somehow flabby.

Geidans evidently grasped that the new arrival had sat down not out of disrespect, but out of the inability to support his body on his legs. Even so, Geidans said, just in case:

"If they caught you, they'd shoot you and even though you came yourself, we'll shoot you anyway."

The giant took this very calmly, lit his pipe, looked round and asked for the others to be sent away. Geidans left only me.

"Secretary."

The giant shook my hand firmly and said:

"I've come from Tyumen. D'you need informers from behind the enemy lines?"

Geidans silently shook his head and suddenly, for no apparent reason, made the sign of the fig at the newcomer with his thumb and fingers. At this point, a strange incident occurred which, no doubt, Geidans will be most amused to read about now. The giant leaned over and bit the fig.

Geidans jumped up, his transparent little eyes rolled skywards and he snatched out his revolver, but the giant let out such a bellow that the Red Guards came running from all over the camp at the noise.

"I won't be made a fool of; insult my body, but not my soul... I was on the Battleship *Potyomkin*, I was..."

The revolver in Geidans's hand was shaking, but it was unlikely that he could have fired it, or rather hit the mark. He seemed not so much angered as frightened. He was looking at his fingers as if they had been bitten by a rabid dog.

The giant was already roaring to the men who had run up that he had come to work honestly with Soviet power, but here they were torturing him. Suddenly a shout rang out of the crowd, in which there were some men from Tyumen.

"Why, lads, its Yegor the Butcher!"

Here Geidans spat on the ground and said very contemptuously for some reason:

"Get to hell out of here!"

Yegor the Butcher left quickly and Geidans took out his Marx.

Cursing the bourgeoisie at length, Yegor Khvosch told how, arriving after the 1905 uprising in Tyumen, he had become a butcher and how well he had done in that trade.

For a long time, at first, his revolutionary conscience as a *Potyomkin* sailor would not let him trade, but he could only work on the steamers as a cook because of his galloping corpulence, and he despised the river steamers, especially the cooks on board. Common tavern cooks, pancake-tossers! After much anguish, he opened a shop and began trading. Business went uncommonly well; he acquired a little house, a farm and a wife who presented him with a brood of, for some reason, blond and uncommonly thin children!

He was once even elected to membership of the town Duma, but was dismissed for never showing up at the sessions. The February revolution came and he began suffering; his comrades, no doubt, were held in great esteem in Petrograd, but he was stuck in Tyumen. He tried going to the newspaper and telling his story, but none of them believed him and they even somehow managed to insult him in a very elaborate way.

He tried to join the anarchists but, although they were very broad-minded and cheerful people, they turned him down. And so the fat man wandered for a long time round the board walks of the little town. Finally came the White Czech offensive and Khvosch realized that he must fight for the revolution.

He abandoned business, children and house and rushed after our Red Guard detachments in the steppe.

"You are my only hope, brothers," he concluded in despair.

Geidans looked at him and suddenly asked with rare benignity:

"What tobacco's that you're smoking? Let's have a pull".

He drew on the pipe and said in a languid drawl:

"Not bad, you come across tobacco like that less often than a truthful woman."

Alas, Geidans was very sentimental (he isn't these days). Yegor silently offered him his tobacco pouch, which looked like a portmanteau; there were at least three pounds of tobacco in it. Geidans helped himself generously (the tobacco was not bad at all) and said:

"What do you think of bringing us, friend?"

"All the information," replied Khvosch. "How things are going with them in Petropavlovsk, how many troops, and their morale."

"Off you go," said Geidans, smoking and opening his Marx. "Off you go, and if you aren't back in a week, I shall regard you as a traitor to the working class and the foulest type of deserter. I'll have you shot when time comes."

He smoked a bit more.

"D'you need any money?"

"I don't need anything," replied Khvosch.

"Then off you go. That's my final word."

But Geidans was true to himself and not for nothing had been studying dialectics according to Marx. He sent his second informer to trail Khvosch. The informer was timid and returned in three days with an approving report.

"There's only one thing I don't understand," he added by way of a reservation.

But we never managed to find out what he couldn't understand; he was clearly scared of Khvosch.

Khvosch showed up exactly a week later, bringing some truly invaluable information which we were not fated to use and, moreover, forty thousand Kerensky rubles. That was a vast sum of money in those times, and Khvosch declared quite brazenly that he would give half to the workers' and peasants' government but the other half he would keep for himself. Amid our indignant shouts, he took out notes from the White Czechs and Atamanovites in his name on which it was clearly stated that this money had been issued to Khvosch for the delivery of meat to the armies of the Constituent Assembly.

"They're going to think I'm a swindler. Is my good name worth nothing to you?" he shouted offensively.

Incidentally, the sailor's conscience quickly made itself heard in him again, because he announced that he would use the money to recruit a detachment to be named after Khvosch. The men began upbraiding him, and soon all forty thousand rubles migrated into Geidans's leather knapsack to join the carefully kept accounts, written in my hand, and the Marx wrapped up in blue sugar-bag paper.

Then the Atamanovites renewed their offensive and our ranks began to thin out noticeably. One day, Khvosch disappeared.

We had no time to think about him; we remembered once at dinner that he used to make good cabbage soup and then we forgot him. Then came our memorable battle with the Cossacks by the little River Ishim, at the crossing, when many fine and jolly men who ought never to have died were killed beside the ugly poplars and the windmill with six sails. We retreated and left our baggage train with the enemy. About thirty of us survived, and we had no information about Tyumen. We were camped there, tired fugitives among the hayricks in the meadows, for some reason called

the Sewers, when we noticed several horses and carts heading for us at a gallop. Geidans shouted that we should dig in, but the voice of Khvosch suddenly rang out across the meadow.

"Want some reinforcements?"

It was Khvosch with about twenty men under a strange yellow banner which he tore up there and then.

"Couldn't get another one anywhere, all the red cloth in the district's been used up."

Meanwhile the Cossacks were still advancing, and soon we were forced to shake hands and disperse, goodness knows where for, singly or, at best, in pairs. I assumed that Tyumen had already fallen and decided to go to the Cossack settlements, nearer to the burial ground of my ancestors.

The best thing for Khvosch to do was to return to Tyumen, but, as I remember, he hiccupped and said glumly:

"I'll come with you."

And so we made the long and cheerless journey to the Cossack settlements. Yegor put up in Pavlodar and went to catch fish on the Three Islands to evade arrest. I have described elsewhere how I fled from my native village. On returning, I rode to the Three Islands to find Khvosch, and the two of us decided to make a dash across the Hungry Steppe to Sergiopol and from there into Russia. There is nothing worse than feeling sorry for oneself, and on horseback a man becomes five times more courageous. So we started out, having obtained excellent horses. We were disguised as Kirghizes; I had sewn into my belt papers from the Omsk detachment of the Red Guards that had been organized by the trade unions. The documents were very elaborately worded and I don't remember what was in them.

Khvosch was wearing a green turban and to the Kirghizes he made himself out to be an Arab scholar.

A naive land of felt tents and felt hats; white-bearded Biblical patriarchs who gave us mare's milk; barrows in the steppe and the strange gravestones of the Kara-Kalpaks.

Then (with a joy as enormous as this white night) we heard that detachments of Magyars among the first to join the Red Army in Siberia, were also riding over the steppes to Sergiopol after being defeated at Krasnoyarsk. We turned and galloped to meet them.

And here was the hill over the Valley of Kara-Sor, with the dust in the distance, and Khvosch said breathlessly:

"They're coming... It's them!"

II

"Yes," I replied, "they're coming. It's them."

We looked down into the valley.

The horsemen were now quite near. They dismounted and let their horses have a rest. They weren't looking upwards; they were used to the Kirghizes.

Then we went down and they were very surprised at hearing Russian spoken. Above all, they were impressed by the enormous carcass of Yegor Khvosch. They exchanged glances and seemed to be taking us for spies. Khvosch whispered to me in alarm:

"Show your papers, you can't bite the fig of this lot. They're in dead earnest."

The Magyars were sun-tanned; they were all in once crimson breeches bleached khaki by the sun. They were ragged, but all were carefully shaven down to the last man. Without showing their distrust, they crowded round me as I ripped open my belt. They smelt pleasantly of Army bread, their two-hundred-strong breathing was harmonious and strong.

I took the papers out, unfolded them, opened them out and ... there was no point in handing them to the detachment commissar. After the long gallop, while we were racing over the dunes and in the stifling heat in our attempt to intercept the Magyars, the papers had been soaked with sweat, the ink and the stamp were badly smudged and they were totally illegible.

The commissar took another look at Khvosch.

"We haven't time to talk or to question you," he said. "They've been chasing us for a week... We're not going to bother about who you are... Go your way, we'll go ours, and we shan't interfere with one another."

I wanted to talk about acquaintances in common, but the commissar interrupted me.

"Don't hold up the detachment. We're suspicious."

Khvosch and I went back behind the hill.

"We should have mentioned Geidans," he said thoughtfully. "He was a foreigner too, but he could trust people."

I turned round to look at the horsemen.

"Khvosch, it looks as though we were in luck when we got our papers messed up."

Khvosch turned round heavily, like a windmill.

"You're always looking after Number One. But you can't expect for the whole of your human life..."

He didn't finish uttering his thoughts; they were sliding like lard down glass. He suddenly clapped me with his huge hand.

"Over there is it? Did you mean that about dust? Over there?"

"Over there," I replied. "Dust."

"They're coming, friend. After this lot."

"They're coming. After the Magyars."

And Yegor shouted loud enough for the whole valley to hear:

"They're coming, lads!.. They're coming! They're after you!"

He ran downhill, but a heavily bewhiskered Magyar levelled his carbine at him. All looked round, and Khvosch walked back to me.

"Things are bad, mate," he said worriedly. "They won't even let us die with them. Why?" The pursuers were coming nearer. They were sitting grimly erect on their horses and seemed unaware of the Mongol style of riding a horse.

"Czechs," said Khvosch. "Lie down. Should I go and get our shotguns? We could fire at them, mate, even if only with small shot."

"You won't get them in time. Lie down."

Khvosch flopped heavily to earth.

"Probably the best thing to do—lie down."

The approaching riders dismounted and fired a few shots; the Magyars answered them very raggedly. The White Czechs leaped on to their mounts again and moved on along the valley.

"I don't understand a damn thing," said Yegor. "They're heading straight for death... The Magyars will use their machine-gun..."

But the Magyar machine-gun was strangely silent. They fired another ragged volley.

"I thought they were fighters... Is that the way to fight?.. Kuropatkin used to fight like that, the son-of-a-she-cat..."

Both detachments leapt to horse again. The dust hid the collision for a moment. Then we saw the usual cavalry mêlée: several slashed bodies; horses whinnying and galloping awkwardly; blood on the sand from sabre-wounds.

Khvosch began to realize what was happening.

"Can't wait. Eh? They can't wait, they want to fight hand-to-hand, eh?"

He rose to a kneeling position and opened wide his moist, flabby mouth.

"Don't shout," I told him.

"I'm not going to. What is that, eh?"

The horsemen were still backing off and shouting something at one another. Finally, one of the Magyars—I remember he was very tall and, as it seemed to me, with a very long head—jumped down from his horse, pulled from his belt a German bayonet of the kind we in Siberia used to carry in lieu of a dagger and, limping on one leg, ran towards the White Czechs. The other Magyars immediately dismounted after him. Their horses clustered together.

The White Czechs also abandoned their horses, and so, armed only with knives, the two detachments advanced on each other.

The dust of the Hungry Steppe is as thick as felt! But I clearly remember that enormous mass of human bodies, darting about, strangling one another, wheezing and with their teeth—yes, with their teeth—gnawing one another's necks. I saw faces slashed to ribbons, the strange whiteness of hands dropping knives.

The mass broke up from time to time. A man would bound away. He would run three or four steps to one side and collapse with the death rattle in his throat!

Sometimes the mass expanded. It was as if the men were jumping to their feet and running for their rifles. But no, it was the dust and sand billowing outwards.

Khvosch was standing, his incredible body quivering all over.

"Break them up, break them up, lad..." he shouted to me. "It oughtn't to be allowed!"

Finally, the dust settled, several dozen of the Czech survivors rose to their feet and slowly, gasping for breath and wearily raising their hands, began butchering the wounded.

Khvosch flopped down beside me and, laying his hand on my shoulder, said:

"Those Magyars... Didn't they fight tooth and nail for us?"

The remaining White Czechs, having wearily buried their fellow-countrymen, without looking at us and without even looking up the hill, galloped off.

We picked up a few surviving Magyar horses in the steppe. The Kirghizes came out of their yurts.

"At least we ought to bury the commander," said Khvosch. "The commander who..."

But we were unable to identify the commander among the dead.

We saddled our horses and set off in another direction, to the left of Lake Kara-Sor, along our former route, the Kan-Jol road, past Lake Togoi and Chun-Kul so as to go down to Sergiopol through the Chenchiz-Tau mountains. It was cool in the steppe and the moon was rising.

III

I might never have written this. I find it harder and harder to write about myself.

But now it's spring, 1924. I have had a letter from Khvosch in Tyumen. He invites me to visit him in the summer.

I read it and thought, "I wonder if he's trading in meat again?" Then I decided to write a story.

Let Khvosch read this at the samovar in his house and send everything to hell; and perhaps ride away... Gallop off to find his youth...

1924

Translated by Alex Miller

BORIS PILNYAK

(1894-1937)

Boris Pilnyak was born in the small town of Mozhaish in Moscow gubernia. Impressions of provincial life occur in many of his works, including his novels "The Lean Year" (1921), "Machines and Wolves" (1924) and the short stories "Deaths" (1915), "A Year of Their Life" (1916), "The Heirs" (1919), "A Tale of the Oka" (1927) and others.

Boris Pilnyak has gone down in the history of Soviet literature with his novel "The Lean Year", which brought him world fame. According to Pilnyak, the cleansing whirlwind of the Revolution swept away all the dirt and falsity of the old life, making room for the construction of a rational society. "Old Russia has perished, has disintegrated, and there is a breath of the new Russia, the real one, the Russia of the worker and the peasant." This was written about the novel by a well-known critic of the 1920s and 1930s, Alexei Voronsky.

A very talented writer, Pilnyak sought agonizingly and stubbornly for his true way in literature. At first, he fell very much under the influence of the symbolist writers Andrei Bely and Alexei Remizov. After overcoming the mistakes and vagaries that resulted from a misunderstanding of the New Economic Policy, Pilnyak arrived in the 1930s at the unqualified acceptance of socialist reality and made his own contribution towards developing the method of socialist realism: his novels "The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea" (1930), "The Ripening of the Fruit" (1935), "The Salt Shed" (1937), "Okay" (1937), a book of essays, "Tajikistan, the Seventh Soviet Republic", and his short stories "City of Winds" (1928), "The Birth of a Man" (1928) and others.

"All the best, all that is honest, all that is truly human in life," wrote Pilnyak in 1937, "came when I drew near to the Revolution."

A STORY OF HOW STORIES ARE WRITTEN*

I

I met the writer Tagaki in Tokyo by chance. I was introduced to him at one of the Japanese literary houses. It was our first and last meeting. We exchanged a few words which I have forgotten, remembering only that his wife was Russian. He was very *sibui* (*sibui* is the Japanese equivalent of chic—an affected simplicity), his kimono was affectingly simple, as were his *geta* (the wooden benches that Japanese wear instead of shoes); he held a straw hat in his hands, and his hands were beautiful. He spoke Russian. He was dark-skinned, lean and handsome as Japanese can be handsome to the European eye. I was told that he had won fame with a novel in which he described a European woman.

He would have faded from my memory like many chance acquaintances if...

In the Japanese town of K., in the consular archives, I found the papers of Sophia Vasilievna Gnedykh-Tagaki, who was applying for repatriation. My fellow-countryman, Comrade Dzhurba, Secretary of the General Consulate, took me to Mayu-san in the mountains over the town of K., to the Temple of the Fox. To get there you had to go by car first, then by funicular railway, and after that you had to walk up the rocks on foot along paths and through woods into a cedar grove, into silence, where a Buddhist bell boomed in the most dismal manner. The fox is the god of cunning and betrayal. If the spirit of the fox gets into a man, that man's family is doomed. In the gloom of the cedars, on the platform, three sides of which were vertical cliffs, stood a monastery-type temple with foxes entombed in its altars. It was very quiet there, with a panoramic view of a mountain range and of the Pacific Ocean receding into

infinity. Even so, not far from the temple, even higher in the mountains, from where the other side of the range could be seen, we found a little tavern selling chilled beer. Two fellow-countrymen can have a very agreeable chat over beer to the murmur of cedars high above the ocean. That was when Comrade Dzhurba told the story that gave me occasion to remember the writer Tagaki and as a result of which I am penning this story now.

At the time, on Mayu-san, I was thinking how stories are written.

Yes, how are stories written?

That evening, I dug out the sheet of paper on which Sophia Vasilievna Gnedykh-Tagaki had written her life story from the day of her birth, with an erroneous idea of how repatriates should give their autobiography. For me, the life story of this woman begins at the moment when the ship arrived in Port Tsuruoka. It is a common and brief one; this excludes it from a thousand biographies of Russian provincial women which ought to be described by the statistical-nomographic method—the election register, since they are all as alike as two baskets—the basket of first love, of hurt feelings, of joys, of husband and child for the benefit of the homeland, and not very much else...

II

The story is about him and her.

I was in Vladivostok once, near the end of August, and I shall always remember it as a city of golden days, spacious air, a strong wind from the sea, a city of the sea, of the sky, of remote horizons, of a hard desolation that reminded me of Norway, for in both places the land falls sheer down into the ocean in bald masses of rock crowned by solitary pines. To tell the truth, this is only the technique of using descriptions of natural scenery to supplement the characters of the main personages. She, Sophia Vasilievna Gnedykh, or Sonya Gnedykh, was born and grew up in Vladivostok.

I am trying to give a picture of her...

She went through secondary school in order to work as a teacher until a husband eventually turned up: she was the

kind of girl of whom there are said to be thousands in old Russia. She probably knew Pushkin exactly as well as demanded by the school curriculum and she probably confused ethics and aesthetics, as I once did when showing off in a composition about Pushkin written in the sixth form at secondary school. And, of course, she did not even know that Pushkin really begins when the secondary school curriculum ends, just as she never once gave it a thought that people consider their own limited ideas as a standard applicable to everything, according to which anything higher or lower than these ideas seems a bit stupid or just plain stupid to a person, if that person is a bit stupid. She had read all Chekhov because he was in the supplement to her father's *Niva*, and Chekhov knew that this girl was "forgive me, Lord, a bit stupid". But if Pushkin came to mind, than that girl (and I want it to be so) could be a bit stupid, like poetry, as is appropriate to an eighteen-year-old. She had her own ideas of beauty (Japanese kimonos were very beautiful, just the ones which are not worn by the Japanese themselves but are manufactured by them for foreigners); of justice (when she justly started cutting Ivantsov, who had talked too freely about their rendezvous); of knowledge (when the suitcase of knowledge contained the conviction that Pushkin and Chekhov, both great writers, first, were unusual people but, secondly, were now extinct like the mammoths, because there isn't anything usual any more, since no one is a prophet in his own country)... If, however, it is a writers' convention to supplement the characters of the leading personages with descriptions of nature, then let this girl, in the name of that somewhat stupid—forgive us, Lord—poetry, be as transparent as the sky, the sea and the rocks of the Far Eastern Russian coastline.

Sophia Vasilievna had contrived to write her autobiography in such a way that neither from the consul's viewpoint nor mine did anything come out of it except a sence of bewilderment (not very great in my case) that this woman should have contrived to miss out everything that people lived by in those years. As is known, the Japanese Imperial Army was in the Russian Far East in 1920 with the intention of occupying the Far East. It is also known that the Japanese were driven out by partisans. Not a word

about this occurs in the autobiography.

He was an officer in the General Staff of the Imperial Japanese Army of Occupation. In Vladivostok, he was billeted in the house where she rented a room.

Here are some excerpts from the autobiography.

"...he was never referred to otherwise than as "Monkey"... All were very much surprised that he had a bath twice a day, wore silk underwear and put on pyjamas at night... Then they began to respect him... He always stayed at home in the evenings and read Russian books aloud, poetry and short stories by the contemporary poets I haven't heard of, Bryusov and Bunin. He spoke Russian well, with one blemish: instead of "l", he used to say "r". This became a cause of our acquaintance: I was standing at the door, he was reading poetry, and then he started singing quietly:

Night was breathing softly...

I couldn't contain myself and burst out laughing. He opened the door before I had time to get past, and said:

"Excuse please, it is wrong to invite a Mademoiselle. Arrow me to carr on you."

I was very embarrassed, didn't understand anything, said "Excuse me!" and went back to my room. On the next day, he called on me. He gave me a great big box of chocolates. "Please to permit visit. Please, chocate. What is your impression of the weather?"

This Japanese officer proved to be a man of honourable intentions, not at all like Second Lieutenant Ivantsov, who arranged trysts in dark corners and stole kisses. Tagaki's invitations to the theatre were for the front stalls and he did not entice her into a café after the show. Sonya Gnedikh wrote her mother a letter about the officer's honourable intentions. In her autobiographical confession she described in detail how one evening, while sitting late with her, his face suddenly turned purple and his eyes went bloodshot. He immediately left the room, and she realized that passion had blazed up in him. She wept into her pillow for a long time, aware of how physically terrifying he was to her, this Japanese, a racial alien. "But afterwards the very bursts of passion which he was so good at restraining began

to excite my feminine curiosity." She fell in love with him. He proposed to her *à la Tourguénieff*, in a uniform with white gloves on the morning of a festival and in the presence of the landlord and landlady. He offered his hand and heart according to all the European rules of etiquette.

"He said that in a week's time he was going to Japan and asked me to follow him, because the Red partisans would soon seize the city. Under the Japanese Army regulations, officers cannot marry foreigners, and officers of the General Staff cannot marry at all until a certain term has expired. He consequently asked me to keep our engagement strictly secret and, until he retired, to live with his parents in a Japanese village. He left one and half thousand yen and a guarantee so that I would be allowed to travel to his parents. I gave my consent..."

The Japanese were hated all along the Russian Far Eastern coast; they would seize Bolsheviks, murder them, throw them into furnaces or shoot them. The partisans stopped at nothing to destroy the Japanese. Kolchak and Semyonov were dead, the partisans rolled on like a massive flow of lava, but not a word about this was said by Sophia Vasilievna.

III

At this point begins the independent autobiography of Sophia Vasilievna, the day when she set foot on the Japanese archipelago, a story confirming the laws of big numbers by statistical exceptions.

I know what the Japanese police are like, those police whom the Japanese themselves call *inu*—dogs. The *inu* act demoralizingly because they are in a hurry; they speak Russian appallingly and start an interrogation beginning with the name and surname of the grandmother on the maternal side. They explain that "the Japanese police want to know everything"—and they extract the "purpose of your visit" with pincers. The Japanese police go through baggage by the method of *sinobi*, the Japanese science of search, not less sickeningly than the way they investigate the soul. Tsuruoka is a provincial port where there is not a single

European building and there are only the hut-like Japanese houses; a port that smells of squid, which they gut, press (in order to process the carcass) and dry in the same port. Added to her confusion at the attitude of the police in that Japanese province, there was the fact that the gesture with which they say "Come here" in Vladivostok means "Go away from me" in Tsuruoka, and the faces of the inhabitants express nothing, in conformity with the rules of Japanese etiquette according to which all possible expression of feeling, even with the eyes, is forbidden.

Sophia Vasilievna must have been asked "purpose of your visit", and she could have forgotten the name and surname of her grandmother on the maternal side. As she briefly wrote about this:

"They started interrogating me about the purpose of my arrival. They arrested me. I spent a whole day in the police station. They questioned me all the time about my relationship with Tagaki and why he had recommended me. I then admitted that I was his fiancée, because the police said that if I didn't admit it they would send me back by the same boat. As soon as I owned up, they left me in peace and brought me rice and two chopsticks, which at that time I did not know how to use."

That evening, Tagaki arrived in Tsuruoka. She saw him through the window as he went to the Chief of Police. They asked him about the girl. He behaved courageously; he said yes, she was his fiancée. They advised him to send her back, but he refused. They told him that he would be discharged from the army and banished; he knew that anyway. Then they let him and her go. He kissed her hand *à la Tourguénieff* and did not say a word of reproach. He put her on the train, saying that his brother would meet her in Osaka, but he himself was "somewhat busy". He disappeared into the darkness, the train went away into the black mountains to leave her in the cruellest solitude and to confirm in the most convincing way that he, Tagaki, was the only one in the whole world whom she loved, to whom she was faithful and to whom she was wholly indebted, full of gratitude and bewilderment. It was very bright in the carriage. Nothing was visible outside the windows because of the darkness. Everything immediately around her seemed terrifying and

incomprehensible—when the Japanese travelling with her in the carriage, men and women alike, unashamed of the naked body, began to undress before going to sleep, and when through the windows at the station they began selling hot tea in little bottles, and also little pinewood boxes containing a supper of rice, fish and radishes with a paper napkin, a toothpick and two chopsticks with which you had to eat. Then the lights were put out in the carriage and the passengers went to sleep. She lay awake all night in solitude, incomprehension and terror. She understood nothing. In Osaka, she was the last to step down on to the platform, and at once there appeared before her a man in a brown woollen spotted kimono and with wooden benches on his feet. This man offended her deeply; he began hissing as he bowed, held his legs with his hands as he did so and presented her with a visiting card, but did not offer her his hand. She did not know that he was greeting her according to the rules of Japanese etiquette; she had been prepared to throw herself into the arms of a relative and he did not even offer her his hand. She stood there, flushing with indignation. He did not speak a word of Russian. He touched her shoulder and pointed to the exit. They got into a car. The city deafened and blinded her, an enormous city after which Vladivostok began to seem like a village. They arrived at a restaurant where they were served an English breakfast; she did not understand why the fruit had to be eaten before the ham and eggs. Firmly touching her shoulder, without saying a word and seldom smiling, he indicated what she should do. After breakfast, he escorted her to the washroom and did not leave her. She did not know that there are common washrooms for men and women in Japan. Embarrassed, she gestured that he should go outside, but he didn't understand and began urinating.

Then they got into another train. He bought her *bento* (lunch in a little pinewood box) and coffee; and he put into her hands, for the first time in her life, chopsticks for her to use.

They alighted from the train at dusk. Outside the station, he sat her in a rickshaw and the blood rushed to her cheeks at the unbearable shame that every European experiences when riding in one for the first time; but she had no choice. At first through a busy town, then along paths and cedar

avenues past little houses lost in flowers and greenery, the rickshaws took them downhill towards the sea which lay between the cliffs. Under a sheer cliff, on a platform over the sea, surrounded by trees, stood a little house at which they stopped. Out of the house came an old man and an old woman, children and young woman, all in kimonos and all bowing to the waist without offering their hands. She was not admitted into the house straightaway; her fiancé's brother pointed at her feet. She did not understand. Then he sat her on a step, almost by force, and unlaced her shoes. The women fell on their knees before her, on the threshold, inviting her to come in. The whole house was toylike; in the far room the wall had been moved apart and there was a broad view of the sea, the sky, the cliffs plunging down to the sea—this side of the house was on the edge of a cliff. Many bowls stood on trays on the floor of the room and opposite each tray lay a cushion. All of them, herself included, sat on the cushions in front of the trays on the floor in order to have supper.

Tagaki-san, the groom, arrived a day later. He entered the house in a kimono and she did not recognize him, this man who bowed low first to his father and brother, then to his mother, and only then to her. She was ready to rush into his arms; he held back his hand for a moment in hesitation, then took her hand and kissed it. He had arrived in the morning. He announced that he had been to Tokyo, that he had been discharged from the army as a punishment and had been banished to the country for two years. They had allowed him to serve his term of banishment at home, in his father's house; that house and that cliff they could not leave for two years. She was happy. He brought many kimonos from Tokyo. On that day they went to register their marriage. She wore a pale-blue kimono and a Japanese coiffure built up of her wheat-coloured hair. The *obi*, or belt, restricted her breathing and pressed heavily on her chest, and the clogs gave her callouses between the toes. She became Tagaki-noöku-san instead of Sonya Gnedykh. The only way she could recompense her husband, her beloved husband, was not with gratitude, but with true

passion, at night, on the floor, in their night kimonos, when she yielded herself to him and when she lay resting from tenderness, pain and passion, she could hear the boom of the incoming tide down below.

IV

In autumn they all went away, leaving the two newly-weds behind. They sent him cases of English, Russian and Japanese books from Tokyo. She wrote almost nothing in her application about this time. One may imagine how the winds blew from the ocean in the autumn, how the cliffs thundered, how cold and lonely it was to sit together for hours, days and weeks by the *hibati*, or domestic hearth. She had already learned to give greetings, *o-yasumi-nasai*; to say goodbye, *say-onara*; to reply in gratitude, *do-itasima-siteh*; to ask someone to wait while she fetched her husband, *chotto-mato-kudasai*. In her free time, she learned that rice, like bread, could be boiled in many different ways and that, just as Europeans do not understand anything about the methods of preparing rice, so the Japanese are unable to bake bread. From the books sent to her husband, she learned that Pushkin begins where the high school curriculum ends and that Pushkin had not become extinct like the mammoth, but was alive, living and would live. She learned from her husband and from books that the greatest literature and meditation in the world are Russian. They followed a strict country regimen, almost a starvation diet. In the morning the husband would sit by the *hibati* on the floor with his books, she would cook rice and pancakes; they would drink tea and eat salted pears and unsalted rice. Her husband had hardly any needs; he could sustain himself for a whole month on rice alone, but she would cook a Russian dinner. In the morning she went shopping in town, where she was surprised to find that the Japanese do not sell chickens whole, but separately, as wings, legs, back and skin. They used to go for strolls at twilight to the sea or to the little mountain temple in the hills. She was already used to walking in *geta* and bowing to her neighbours as the Japanese do, to the waist, with the hands on the knees. In the evenings they sat over their books. Many nights were

spent in passion; her husband was passionate and refined in his passion, thanks to the long culture of his forebears, a culture alien to that of Europe. On the first day of their marriage, his mother had silently—for they had no language in common—presented her with erotic pictures on silk depicting all possible modes of sexual love. She loved, respected and feared her husband: respected him because he was omnipotent, noble, silent and knew everything; loved and feared him because of his passion that consumed, enslaved her and drained her of her strength, but not him. On ordinary days her husband was silent, polite, attentive and just a trifle austere in his nobility. She actually knew little about him and his family: his father had a silk factory somewhere. Friends occasionally came from Tokyo and Kyoto to visit her husband and then he would ask her to wear European clothes and meet the guests in the European style. Nevertheless, he drank saké, or Japanese vodka, with the guests, their eyes went bloodshot after the second glass, they talked incessantly and then, quite tipsy, would sing their own songs and leave for the city before morning. They led a solitary life; the cold of the white winters alternated with the heat of the summers, the incoming tide and the storms boomed below, and the sea was quietly pale-blue at ebbside. Her days were not even like beads, because beads can be counted on the string as they are counted by European and Buddhist monks; but she could not count her days, even though they were of jasper.

It is now possible to finish this story, the story of how stories are written.

A year passed, and then another, and then yet another. His banishment was over, but they stayed there for another year without leaving home. Suddenly, many friends began coming to them in their solitude. People bowed low to her and her husband, photographed him at his books and with her beside him and asked her about her impressions of Japan. People seemed to be descending on them like peas from out of a sack. She learned that her husband had written a famous novel. Many showed her magazines for which they had been photographed together—in the house, near the house, on walks to the temple, strolling to the sea—herself in a Japanese kimono, herself in European dress.

She could already speak a little Japanese. She had now assumed the role of the famous novelist's wife, unaware of the inner change that had secretly taken place when she ceased to fear the alien people about her and realized that they begrudged her neither favours nor courtesy. But she did not know her husband's famous novel or its contents. She asked her husband about it; with his exquisitely polite taciturnity, he did not answer this question—perhaps because it was not really essential to her, she did not bother to insist. The jasper days were over. Servants now boiled the rice and she rode to town in a car, giving instructions to the chauffeur in Japanese. When he arrived, the father bowed to his son's wife more respectfully than she to him. Perhaps Sophia Vasilievna would have been a very good wife to the writer Tagaki, just like Heinrich Heine's wife, who used to ask the poet's friends, "Is it true that Henri has written something new?"

But Sophia Vasilievna found out about the contents of her husband's novel. A correspondent, who spoke Russian, came from a paper in the capital when her husband was not at home. They went for a walk by the sea. And there, in the middle of an inconsequential chat, she asked him to what he attributed the success of her husband's novel and what he regarded as essential about it.

V

... That is all. After gaining access to Sophia Vasilievna Gnedykh-Tagaki's autobiography in the consular archives in the town of K., I bought her husband's novel the next day. My friend Takahasi translated the contents for me. The novel is with me now. I have written the fourth chapter of this story, not by making things up, but simply by retelling what my friend Takahasi-san translated for me. Each day, during the years of banishment, Tagaki had been writing down his observations of his wife, the Russian woman who did not know that the greatness of Russia begins where the high-school curriculum ends. Japanese morality is not ashamed of the naked body, of natural human functions or of the sex act: Tagaki's novel was written with a clinical attention to detail: applying the Russian mode of reflection, Tagaki reflected about the time, thoughts and body of

his wife. During the chat by the sea, the correspondent of the Tokyo newspaper revealed to Tagaki-noöku-san, the wife of the famous writer, not a mirror, but a philosophy of mirrors; she saw herself coming to life on paper, and it did not matter that the novel contained clinically precise descriptions of how she convulsed in passion or when her stomach was upset: what was terrible for her came next. She realized that everything, her whole life, had been material for observation; her husband had been spying on her every moment of their life. It was this that was so horrible; it was a cruel betrayal of everything that she had valued. She applied, through the consulate, to go back home to Vladivostok.

I read and re-read her autobiography very carefully. It was all written by one person at one go, needless to say; yet those parts in the autobiography of this somewhat stupid woman, in which, for some unknown reason, she described childhood, high school and life in Vladivostok and even daily life in Japan, were written as helplessly as the letters of one schoolgirl to another in the sixth class at high school, *à la Charskaya*, on the principle of school compositions. As for the last part, however, where she was summing up life with her husband, the woman had expressed herself simply and clearly, even as she had found the strength to act simply and clear-headedly. She renounced the prestige of being wife to a famous writer, she gave up the love and affection of the jasper time, and she returned to Vladivostok.

That is all.

She had lived out her autobiography. Her biography has been written by me, showing that it is much harder to endure death than to commit murder.

He wrote a beautiful novel.

It is not for me to judge people. But it is my lot to reflect on how, amongst other things, stories are written.

The fox is the god of cunning and betrayal. If the spirit of the fox gets into a human being, that man's family is doomed. The fox is the writer's god!

Uzkoye,
5 November, 1926

Translated by Alex Miller

MIKHAIL PRISHVIN

(1873-1954)

Mikhail Prishvin, writer, traveller and great nature lover, can be called a fortunate man, for this is what he himself once wrote: "My heart is overflowing with happiness. I should like to open everyone's eyes to the fact that it is possible for men to live beautifully, to breathe pure, sunlit frosty air, to look and listen to the lilies, to divine their music..." In our day of fuss and bustle, such a complete unity with nature is a very rare thing, and one cannot help envying anyone who has kept his ability to thus see and feel the surrounding world.

Prishvin's stories are suffused with infinite affection for all living things on earth; his world outlook is joyful and optimistic. He believes that man and the nature about him are one single whole, and so the ultimate triumph of the good and the harmonious in life is already predetermined. Maxim Gorky, a discerning and exacting critic, once wrote to Prishvin: "In no author have I ever found such an all-embrac-

ing, poignant and jubilant love for this earth of ours, for all its living and, allegedly, dead things. When I read your 'phenological' conjectures and discourses, I have to smile, to laugh for sheer joy—it's all so amazingly lovely! I am not exaggerating, I am honestly left with an awareness of an absolutely extraordinary beauty with which your radiant soul illumines all life, imparting to the birds, the grasses and the hares a wonderful significance and justification."

The informative merits of Prishvin's prose are as precious as the artistic ones. Nature itself seems to speak to us, divulging to us the secrets of its life. "Man creates the world in his image, but then the world also exists without man, and an artist ought to know this better than anyone else. In order to create, it is imperative for him to forget his own self enough to believe in the existence of a given thing, living or dead, in its own right, without himself, without man."

We had expected the event on the fourteenth, but in the late afternoon of the twelfth I noticed signs which indicated that it might take place that very night, and so off I ran to the chemist's for sublimate and carbolic acid, while my wife went to the barn for straw. By the time I came back the heap of straw was in the kitchen. I sprinkled it with sublimate, made a bed of it in the corner and fenced off that corner with a log which I nailed to the wall lest it roll away. Our Kate watched these preparations intelligently, knowing their meaning from last time and waited patiently. As soon as I finished, she stepped over the log and curled up on the straw.

We were not mistaken. That very night Kate brought forth a litter of six pups, three bitches and three males. The three females were smaller than their brothers and had exactly the colouring of their mother, a German pointer with big coffee-coloured spots and a lot of small specks on white. One of the bitches had a kopeck-size brown spot on the pate, another had two kopeck-spots, and the third had no spots on the white pate, and she was noticeably smaller and weaker than her sisters. The males took after Tom, their father: the spots were darker, two of them had no specks for some reason and the third, much bigger than the others, was speckled so densely that he seemed dark all over, and generally was rather heavy and oak-like. The name "Dubets"*** crossed my mind. The Dubets was a river on which I had gone after wood-grouse broods. The hunt had been highly successful and I thought that the word had

*English translation ©Progress Publishers 1976
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***From the Russian *dub*, an oak.—Tr.

cropped up in my mind quite opportunely and that it would not be a bad idea to call my new dog Dubets in memory of those fine hunting grounds. It was high time we stopped giving dogs traditional names and started calling them after our own local things—after all, every brook and hillock in this land had got its name without recourse to Greek mythology.

I had decided to keep one bitch and one male from that litter. As soon as the word Dubets flashed across my mind, I found a name for the bitch too: I would call her Nerle, for I had flushed many great snipe on the marshy banks of that river the year before.

But there was also something else that attracted me about that strange and capricious river. It ran such a winding course that in places I could have reached with my oar from one twist across dry land to the next. I was going downstream in a flat-bottomed boat using the oar to guide it along and to avoid running into the swampy bank, pushing and rowing alternately. Ahead of me I could see a church. It seemed to be quite close, then the river turned off in the opposite direction and the church disappeared. After yet another bend I discovered it again, much farther away than last time. I could hear a young shepherd learning to play a birch-bark pipe. As I twisted my way along, the sound rose or fell, but it was always the same shepherd playing the same melody and making the same mistakes. By lunchtime I reached the village, to discover that it lay quite some distance from the river bank and that I had no business there. I rested on the bank. The shepherd had stopped his piping. When I resumed my journey the piping started all over again and pursued me till evening. Only when the sun was setting I had a bit of grace granted me: the river straightened out and led me away from the village, and here, between the steep wooded banks, the singing of birds asserted itself over the haunting remembrance of a halting melody. The current was very swift here, and the boat was gliding along nicely. All I had to do was hold the oar fast. My glance did not miss the pike that swam past, the blue dragonfly on a blade of grass, a family of snipe perched on the edge of a half-sunken rotting boat, a broad leaf of some water plant sparkling in the rays of the setting sun, and the

reeds bowing me along on the taut stream. What a fruitless day on the river and what an enchanting one: I will never forget it and will never cease loving it.

Oh, wild and wanton Nerle, I will immortalize your name in a live dog for whom the greatest happiness will be to gaze lovingly at man, even when he becomes entangled in the twists of his life.

2

Ever since my pups had been born I had been taking my meals in the kitchen: while eating, I could watch the little animals and ponder on their destinies. Below me swarmed a speckled world of blind beings, and above them, the eyes of the mother gazed on me eternally trying to penetrate my thoughts and read their future—but I was not omnipotent either, I did not yet know in whom I should eventually be able to embody the names Dubets and Nerle. I knew very well that weight and shape were not the only things that counted in a hunting dog. They had to have, first of all, what we shall agree to call intelligence, and it was impossible to recognize this quality at once in the blind offspring of my beautiful Kate. My dog must be intelligent above all, for even weakness of scent can be compensated for by a ready understanding of my guidance, and with a dog like that you will bag more game than with a silly, though sharp-nosed one.

So I had my lunches, suppers and teas, thinking my thoughts, chatting with my wife and watching the puppies all the time. Even reading a newspaper I would still hear the sleeping pups having dreams: though they hardly ever emitted anything but squeaks in their waking hours, in their dreams they were already barking like regular little dogs. But I laid the paper aside as soon as they woke up and started their highly interesting struggle for survival. Every pup then used all of his strength, intelligence, nimbleness and cunning to gain possession of the back, most milky teats. As soon as the mottled tangle of little dogs came awake, they threw themselves into attack on the teats. They scrambled over one another, some finding themselves underneath and lying

prone under the weight of the upper layers, the least lucky ones, rolling off the heap, righting themselves after lying for a while with their pink piglet-like tummies up and then starting the climb all over again. Some even emitted their own special "hurrah" when dashing into attack and their own special squeal in case of failure, and those who got hold of the large teats champed their lips with pleasure and satisfaction—everything was very much like with people fighting among themselves for their daily bread. Of course I could have let the weak and the strong nurse separately. But how was I to tell the weak from the strong? Today the ones who had stronger muscles took the upper hand, tomorrow those who had better intelligence might snatch the prize from the big but stupid one. So I suppressed my pity for those who looked weaker and decided that I would let nature take its course until I discovered which was my Nerle.

The smudgy pup, who had suggested the name Dubets to me, had become so strong in the very first few days that it now took him no time at all to toss aside all the others and get hold of the best back teat. After that, hanging on to it like grim death, he would stay put, champing away contentedly and paying no attention to his brothers and sisters lying on him in two tiers. The one who got the worst deal was the little bitch with the white pate. She never got anything but the upper tiny teats and so, obviously, always went hungry.

In the eyes of dogs we are, of course, real gods: Olympians sitting round the table, eating and discussing the fate of their dogs. My wife and I argued a lot. She was sorry for the little bitch and kept saying that she looked more like the mother than any of the others, that she was wonderfully well-shaped and that our duty was to interfere and not to let her grow feeble from undernourishment. Compassion helped her to discover new charms in her favourite every day and tempt me with them. It was hard enough to withstand the assaults of my wife who wouldn't let me carry my plan through, and then one day another Goddess of Pity came to her aid on our Olympus. She was a friend of ours, a woman frail in body but strong in spirit. She and my wife joined forces at once and began to plead with me

for the weak animal. I hold Anna Vassilyevna (that was the goddess's name) in high regard, and it took all I had to repulse the attack.

"Don't be too liberal with your pity," I said. "Save it for people. Remember that others simply drown unwanted puppies, and I have a plan for choosing a friend with due respect for the laws of nature. All too often we do more harm than good with our misplaced pity."

Anna Vassilyevna tried to take my own reasonable point of view:

"But the little dog costs a lot of money, and if you persist in your experiment you will lose both the pup and the money."

I did not believe that Anna Vassilyevna, a notorious despiser of money, could be bringing up this point in good earnest, and answered curtly to put an end to the argument:

"I don't care about the money. And let the little dog die if that is her lot. Save your pity for people—in that world,"—I pointed to the heap of puppies, "death is not feared, but accepted as release granted by nature."

We sat down to our lunch in silence. My wife gave Anna Vassilyevna lenten fare—mushrooms and cranberry *kissel*.* I am all for people observing the Lent—my own steak tastes especially good when others eat vegetables and fish. So I eat my steak and heartily support the Lent.

I apologized to Anna Vassilyevna for my steak and in order to mitigate the impression of my harsh words on the subject of pups, started telling her about the many ulcers which were cured by the enforced fasting in the post-revolutionary years of famine and economic dislocation.

By the time we were half-way through our lunch, the pups had had their fill of milk and began yawning and climbing one on top of the other for their usual sleeping pyramid. To make them warm and comfortable, we covered the pyramid with my old hunting jacket, and the mother, finally released from her duties, could now go into her corner to the bowl of oatmeal soup. Kate finished her meal before we did, returned to the nest and lay down beside the pups.

**kissel*— a semi-liquid dessert made with cornstarch.—Tr.

An argument, which has not been carried to its conclusion, and a forcefully arrested train of thought goes on in our minds, and because there is no repressing thought a new pretext appears, as if by a miracle, for the argument to be continued and clinched.

We were talking about the good effects of fasting, watching the nest all the while. Suddenly some movement became apparent under the jacket. It was very cautious and unobtrusive, and then a head with a white pate emerged from under the jacket, followed by the graceful body of the little bitch about which there had been so much sword-crossing. All the other puppies were fast asleep, giving bark-like squeals from time to time. There could be no doubt that the little bitch was on a venture all her own. At first we thought she was crawling away from the nest to move her bowels, as all puppies do. But no, she made straight for her mother and seized the back teat. We could actually see her tummy swell out and finally the little bitch fell asleep against her mother's belly, much more comfortable than her brothers and sisters under my hunting jacket. The whole performance staggered us: there we had been arguing about pity, and the pup had found the solution on her own and was lying there sated and content.

"There you are, Anna Vassilyevna," I said triumphantly. "Haven't you told me yourself that in the hard struggle for existence you had won the kind of happiness which the well-provided for and the sated cannot even dream about, and that for this you are prepared to bless even those who were out to do you harm. Can you imagine then how this pup must bless me for not letting you feed it, thus prompting it to find the simple solution with its own, just awakened little mind! "

3

In the evening, when the puppies woke up and went into assault on the teats, the little bitch with the white pate took no part in the scramble. The next morning I found her sleeping at her mother's belly again. We were overjoyed. Not daring to acknowledge her as my Nerle for this exploit

alone, I started calling her Anna Vassilyevna whom we very much liked. In a matter of several days our little Anna Vassilyevna became much bigger and plumper, and we noticed that she was steadier on her feet than any of the other pups. She had also developed a new trait—she went exploring the nest, on trips that took her further and further away from her mother. All the other puppies only knew two ways of life—sleeping and fighting for the teats. Anna Vassilyevna had found a way to exclude the crude fight for existence from her life, her strength increased with every day and my wife and I were happy to see her use the released energy for the satisfaction of her curiosity.

Anna Vassilyevna's travels ended at the foot-high log that separated the nest from the rest of the kitchen. Once she reached it she could only put her front paws on the log and peer at the expanse of the kitchen floor as we do at the expanse of fields and meadows. Her mother would go off into that expanse, do something at the bowl and come back. Anna Vassilyevna started waiting for her mother to return, and when she came back and lay down, the puppy would embrace her muzzle and lick her nose, thus getting a taste of the oatmeal soup. And then one day, when Kate was lapping up the soup, Anna Vassilyevna started whining. Kate left the bowl, returned to her daughter, pushed her onto her back with her muzzle and, apparently thinking that the pup had difficulty in moving her bowels, began massaging her tummy with her tongue. The puppy grew quiet and the mother returned to her bowl. But as soon as the mother went off, Anna Vassilyevna propped herself against the log again and resumed her whining. Kate looked round at her in puzzlement, glanced at me questioningly and started whining as well.

Her eyes said: "Can't imagine what is wrong. Won't you help, master?"

I said to her: "Never mind."

This meant: "Pay no attention, eat your soup. There's no need to spoil the pup." Kate did as she was advised, and the daughter, indignant at her mother's inattention, jerked herself up, plumped over the barrier and made for the bowl at a fast waddle.

It was a most amusing sight, the mother and the daughter

at the bowl: Kate is not a very big dog, but now, beside a smaller copy with the same coffee-coloured spots, the same cropped tail and outstretched neck, she looked huge, with her large pink udder. The tiny Anna Vassilyevna tried to do as her mother did but all she could achieve was licking the rim of the bowl. She found this not nearly satisfying enough and so rose on her hind legs, with the forepaws hanging over the rim of the bowl. She probably imagined it was yet another barrier, and if she pushed herself over it, the secret of the bowl would be disclosed to her. So she made the same risky movement as a moment before at the log and fell plop into the bowl of oatmeal.

By then Kate had eaten a good half of the soup, so Anna Vassilyevna was in no danger of drowning. Soon she emerged without her mother's help, covered with yellowish oatmeal from head to foot. She waddled back to the log and started whining. Dubets chose this moment to wake up and hearing somebody whine behind the log went there to investigate. By then the little Anna Vassilyevna had risen on her hind legs and the next moment she dropped sack-like on the other side of the barrier straight on to Dubets. Her brother sniffed her, then gave her a lick and obviously liked the taste.

The thing that amazed us most was that when the next day Anna Vassilyevna crawled out from under the jacket she was followed by Dubets, who walked after her to the barrier, climbed over it, waddled to the bowl, put his front paws into the oatmeal and started lapping it up. It appeared that Anna Vassilyevna's first journey to the bowl was tantamount to Columbus's discovery of America in our human history. As we know, Columbus was followed to America by all and sundry. The same happened with the pups. The little bitch with the white pate had taught Dubets, and because he was so big and there was plenty of food on him when he is smeared all over with oatmeal, the two little bitches, one with a kopeck-piece on the pate and the other with two kopeck-pieces, started licking him. Soon they got the hang of the thing and learned to make the trip to the bowl too. The two males, however, with white unspeckled heads and pink muzzles kept apart from the jolly company for a long time yet, having no inkling about the discovery of

America. We had to take the two savages to the bowl and push their noses in, keeping them there, until they saw light and started eating. Nerle was also the first to recognize our signal, "tu-tu-tu", for the feeding, Dubets following suit, followed in his turn by the other two bitches. The two stubborn savages with pink muzzles took the longest to take the hint. Then one day, when we were having dinner the entire company in the nest woke up feeling hungry. Nerle, abandoning her whining brothers and sisters, ran up to Mount Olympus and began pulling at the Gods' trousers and skirts, thereby leaving no doubt in our minds that the small graceful dog with the white spot on the pate was the eagerly awaited and planned for Nerle.

1926

Translated by Raissa Bobrova

SERGEI SERGEYEV-TSENSKY

(1875-1958)

Sergeyev-Tsensky, the pen-name of Sergei Sergeyev, Academician of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and State Prize winner, was already regarded as a classic of Soviet literature in his lifetime. To quote the well-known Soviet critic and translator, Nikolai Lyubimov: "As a prose writer, Sergeyev-Tsensky staggers the reader with the scope of his themes, subjects, genres and types, the variety of his techniques and the range of his descriptive methods." This was said after the writer's death, at a distance in time. Here is Maxim Gorky's appreciation of him when he was at the height of his powers: "In Sergeyev-Tsensky, Russian literature has brilliantly continued the colossal work of its classics—Tolstoy, Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Leskov." He described Sergeyev-Tsensky as a "major Russian artist, a master of the mystery of words".

Sergeyev-Tsensky's literary heritage is vast and varied: études, prose-poems, stories, novels and epics. Members of all strata and classes of Russian society appear in his writings: workers, peasants,

landowners, merchants, engineers, land surveyors, lawyers, doctors, soldiers, officers, priests, monks, artists and writers. Each of them speaks his own characteristic language with its distinctive cadences.

Sergeyev-Tsensky structures his works with consummate skill. In his stories, everything is full of vitality: man, the objects around him and nature.

"The Revolution and the Civil War," said Sergeyev-Tsensky, "changed my creative psychology. Observations of social processes lie at the basis of my post-revolutionary works." The story "Living Water" is about the cruel days of the Civil War in Russia, when the first socialist state in the world was fighting internal and external enemies for its existence, for the right to live by new, humane and just laws. The writer took the title of this story from a folk tale, and the whole work is imbued with the people's faith in the triumph of good over evil.

*LIVING WATER**

A Poem

When one man is beating up another, he is not altogether confident. He can even feel apprehensive. Supposing the other suddenly pulls a fast one?..

He is beating with over half his being, but the lesser part is watching and weighing things up.

The lesser whispers, "Enough! " The greater goes on beating... The lesser says distinctly, "Enough! Let him go! " The greater beats more weakly and reluctantly. The lesser finally commands, "Stop! D'you hear?" and instantly takes over from the greater, and the man who was beating goes away from his victim, outwardly and to all appearances in the right and feeling cock-a-hoop, but inwardly sometimes ashamed.

A mob is quite different. It knows nothing about subtleties of feeling. When the mob shouts, it doesn't just shout, it condemns; the mob doesn't reason, it passes sentence in two words; the mob doesn't beat up, it executes, and he whom it beats up knows that his time has come.

Fyodor knew this, Fyodor Titkov from the Cossack village of Uryupinskaya; not very impressive or tall in stature, but tough in body and bright red of face; a young lad as yet, with small eyes that seemed perched directly over the high cheekbones.

But he could see that this was known by another comrade, the one named Manolati, a Bessarabian gypsy, dark-skinned, his whole face covered with white scars, and by the third, Comrade Semyon Karavanchenko, a cobbler from Altyrka, a weedy, hollow-chested man who had a powerful voice and flashing eyes.

When they were seized in that village and their hands

bound, they were asked curtly:

"Bolsheviks?"

"Yes," they answered no less curtly.

Only Manolati added nastily, sticking his neck out:

"You needn't swank, our side'll come out on top."

They were then taken to a well with a very high sweep, and there was no shouting round them or jeering, only the thick dust kicked up by heavy boots. Some sneezed, some coughed, some spat on the ground. Sometimes they glimpsed Cossack women on either side, standing near their houses, and little boys milling around.

Before they had been picked up at work, Titkov had been eating herring and had not had time for a proper drink. Then they had been locked up in a barn for the night.

He was very thirsty and it was a hot day, and when he approached the well, he felt with the whole of his stiff swollen body that they were leading him to the right place. He looked for the bucket.

As big as a vat, its chain gleaming wetly, the bucket had been stood on the well-ledge and he could not take his eyes off it.

They went up; it was full to the brim. Someone had only just been watering his horse and had drawn it up, but the horse had not wanted any more to drink.

The sand round the well was damp and smelt of oxen. A gadfly settled on Titkov's cheek; he brushed it off by rubbing it against his shoulder, still looking at the bucket, and said, when they stopped, not beseechingly, but simply and distinctly:

"Brothers, give us a drink."

At this, a nearby Cossack, red-bearded, with purple veins on his nose and wet strands of hair under the peak of his cap, responded no less distinctly:

"You'll get all the drink you want, you dog!" And hit him savagely on the cheek from which he had just brushed the gadfly.

Then he saw that they had knocked Comrade Semyon off his feet—his two legs hit one of his own, and for some reason he glimpsed Manolati's black head, above the others, as if flying; but no sooner had he noticed this than something from behind hit him so hard on the back of the head

that he went down on his knees and muttered distinctly: "So they're murdering us... It's the end!.."

He pulled his head down between his shoulders like a tortoise and stretched out his legs. He lay prone, and the sand under his lips tasted very damp, with a strong stench of horse urine.

He kept trying to get his hands underneath too, but they were tightly bound; he tugged with all his strength, but the rope wouldn't give way.

They beat him determinedly, silently, merely grunting, and with concentration, the way they stick pigs. At first, Titkov could tell which part hurt most; then, they were already beating non-stop where it hurt, he simply gritted his teeth and swallowed the saliva.

Comrade Semyon screamed thinly and was not heard again. "They've killed him!" thought Titkov, and pulled his head in even further. Manolati was heard several times. He was yelling:

"Our!.. On top!.. Will come!.. Will come! On top!.."

Titkov managed to think clearly about him: "Used to it. Must have been beaten up a hundred times..."

And then they hit him on the right hand so that his head reeled with the pain, and once again they hit him on the head so that he could no longer hear Manolati's shouts or anything else.

He was brought round by the cold.

He was soaking wet from head to foot.

He didn't immediately recall what happened to him, but the first thing he did remember was the well. Then he remembered the Cossacks and how they had been beating him up. "They've thrown me into the well!" he thought. Then he corrected himself: "Why ruin the well? It would have to be cleaned out afterwards..."

Half opening the eye that was above ground level, he saw the wet, red, cracked toe of a boot right in front of his face and heard someone's quite amiable: "Aha! This devil's still alive, would you believe it! "

And then another voice:

"The gypsy's moving too! "

He had just thought that someone wanted to save them, when the toe of that same boot dealt him a crashing blow just underneath the eye.

He lay prone again and drew in his head.

"On top!" wheezed Manolati near by.

Then they began hammering him with their boots. Someone very heavy jumped on his back and danced.

Titkov pulled in his stomach, but the iron-shod heels with their edges tore the skin off his arms... Finally his other hand, not yet fractured by the beating, cracked under a heel just above the wrist.

Titkov was going to lick his damp lips with his tongue, but at that point he passed out.

Then they drenched him again with icy water from the well. He opened one eye again—the other was puffy and the eyelid wouldn't open—and again he saw the enormous wet toe of the boot.

They turned him over. A beard, just like his father's, bent down over him and he whispered into it:

"Water!"

Then several deafening voices said in unison:

"Still alive?... Must be the devil himself... The gypsy conked out, but this one's alive..."

He lay like that for a few moments and saw above him a thicket of beards and red noses among them. As if these people were quite different from the ones who had just been labouring to kill him, he again whispered to them:

"Water... Brothers!..."

But a tired fist slowly rose above him and smashed into his teeth.

"Where's his liver?" someone asked in amazement and even sadly.

Titkov tried to pull his stomach in, but the blow with the iron-shod foot was agonizingly painful.

In about five minutes, all three were lying dead-still by the well.

The Cossacks washed, cleared their throats and blew their noses, as they usually did in the morning on waking up; some of them even wet their hair and tidied it with metal combs.

Cossack women with babes in arms came up to have a

closer look. The sun was already sinking towards noon when up drove a horse and cart on which all three bodies were put and taken to a gully about four versts from the village.

Two young Cossacks walked along beside the cart, rifles glittering behind their backs.

They never went from the village now without rifles, not even only four versts. These were uneasy times; it was 1918.

And so when Titkov, lying in the cart on top of the others, opened his eye, he was almost blinded by the glitter of those two rifles of the Cossacks walking alongside.

As he remembered afterwards, he had seen Cossacks with rifles before; but the unusual glitter this time was not of this world...

Pain flooded his whole body; his throat and all his innards were burning insufferably.

He came to just as the horses were approaching the gully and he was still disinterring from his memory what was wrong with him and where he was and why he was in pain all over, when he heard one Cossack saying to the other:

"It's a steep bank here... They'll fly like jackdaws."

And the other voice replied:

"Just the right spot—goes without saying."

Titkov couldn't understand this dialogue and when, swearing, they were dragging him, still wet, out of the cart, he groaned with all the agony of his battered body and looked with his single eye—four hands lost their grip in superstitious fear, so that he crashed to the ground and groaned even more loudly.

The horses snorted and shook their heads; the two with rifles recoiled some twenty paces...

He listened and heard one of them, swearing at length, add:

"Why, you devil, when will you conk out?"

When he looked, he saw the other jerk up his rifle, take aim and fire...

Titkov convulsed slightly as if a huge nail had been driven into his chest... But there and then, just a little higher, another nail was driven in: it was the second Cossack discharging a round at him.

His mouth opened to let the blood run out; his head jerked twice and he lay still.

The Cossacks dragged to the edge the already stiffening corpse of Semyon with his head smashed in, took him by the feet and shoulders and swung him over the edge in silence. The body of Manolati the gypsy, with his head twisted on one side, was thrown over with the comment:

"Try coming out on top down there! "

However, they paused over Titkov's body after dragging it to the rim of the gully.

"Supposing this devil..." began one.

"Alive, you think?" said the other.

They even pulled up his wet shirt to find out where the bullets had struck him. However, on seeing that his body was one great mass of bruises and that the bullets had gone straight through the right side of his chest and come out at the back, they merely shook the forelocks under the peaks of their caps, smoothly pushed him over the edge and watched as he rolled head over heels, his legs and his head alternately hitting the side until he landed on the bottom of the gully beside the other two bodies.

It was almost evening. The sun had already gone down behind the gully: shadows and coolness.

Three women from a nearby farmstead went down into the gully for firewood. There were bushes growing here and there on the bottom and sides. They were determinedly hacked out every year, but they grew again no less stubbornly. The women were carrying choppers and ropes.

When they stumbled on the corpses, they made to flee in fright, but looked back and stopped. Urging one another on, they made their way to the bodies.

They looked, shook their heads and even lifted the corners of their headscarfs to their eyes.

"Aren't they stinking yet?" asked one uncertainly.

"Seems like they're fresh," said the other, sniffing.

"But I came down yesterday, there was nothing here then! " The third threw up her hands. "What villains did this to them?"

Corpses should lie still where they are. It's terrifying when one of them tries to raise its head. It could frighten folks.

And when, one eye barely open, Titkov's head turned weakly, the women gasped, screamed in unison and fled, their fat calves twinkling over the bottom of the gully.

Less than a quarter of an hour later, egging one another on, they went up to him for the third time and heard him whisper:

"Girls, a drink..."

A little spring bubbled through in a depression about twenty paces below; the women knew about it, but they had neither ewers nor mugs on them, only choppers and ropes...

On looking round, they noticed a bloody cap on the cliff-side; it had flown off Semyon Karavanchenko's head when his body was being swung over. In this cap, after rinsing it, they brought Titkov some water and, clustering over him and holding the capful of water so as make it more convenient for him, they watched eagerly as he eagerly swallowed the water.

He drank all they had brought him and sighed with an effort, his solitary eye wandering watchfully from one woman to the other.

"What villains did that to you, poor man?" said one of them, but he responded in the same whisper that seemed to come from deep down inside him:

"Girls ... please ... could I ... more water?"

It was already getting dark when the women finally dragged him up out of the gully.

They stopped over him several times for a rest. He was unconscious again, and they said to one another reproachfully:

"We disturbed the man for nothing... He could have died down there during the night and it would have been easier for him: no suffering..."

However, they carried him out, unbound his hands and even took him by night to the hospital in town twelve versts away. They reproached one another on the way, saying it would have been better not to have gone anywhere near him, not to have taken him water and not to have carried him out of the gully. They wouldn't get him to hospital alive anyway; they'd lost a night's sleep for nothing and they'd worn out the horse.

Their only consolation was that there were few men in the village and they had none at all on the farmstead, and the women were ruling the roost now. They wanted to take this man to hospital, and that was that; they'd take him and they'd get him there... Let him die in hospital, at least it would be better; people would give him a decent burial.

When asked in the hospital where he was from and who had done that to him, the women answered:

"How are we to know?.. We found him in the gully..."

"Why did you bring him?" they asked in the hospital. "He won't live anyway..."

"If he dies, we'll bring a wreath for his grave," said the women. "We've got to get home by morning or the cows won't get milked."

And the women returned home in time, just as dawn was breaking, and in the morning the hospital doctors began examining and noting down Titkov's broken ribs.

A month passed. It was a holiday, with time off work. The three peasant women from the farmstead drove into town with a wreath of their own unsophisticated flowers to lay on the grave of the man to whom they had given water and whom they had carried out of the gully.

During that month, all kinds of different things had happened, and it was already known that the bodies in the gully had been brought from the Cossack village.

A summer's day is enormously long, and the women left at dinner-time, intending to return by evening. They had no other business in town at all except to stand by a grave, lay a wreath and go home.

They had two horses which were sleek and strong.

As the hoofs and wheels clattered over the little-used country road, the women recalled how they had brought the young man to hospital.

"Was that the way to take a wounded man?" said one of them reasonably. This was Lukerya, a little older than the others, about forty, with faded eyes. "He could've been killed by one jolt of the cart."

"I was whipping the mare with the reins and looking back

at him, girls, and I felt so sorry for him..." said Aksinya, a slightly younger woman with arched black eyebrows.

"I cradled his head on my knees, and I sat like that all the way without moving, and my legs went numb," interposed Likonida, the third and youngest; and there was longing in her eyes. "We could at least have got his name."

The women rode with the wreath, and on either side of them lay the Cossacks' fields; then they crossed the regional boundary and could feel safe.

Many people of different kinds had recently crossed these fields and had flattened the corn in places. The women could see the signs of brutally trampling feet in the fields.

However, the sun was shining gently and the earth smelt of its own fresh body—something the women could understand, for does not earth have the body of a woman?

The dot of a hawk was circling above, watching the ground as he always watched it in summer when the young ones are born. A cuckoo was calling in a dell. Grey gadflies with big eyes were settling on the rumps of the horses, and the horses were whirling their tails, demanding that they be driven away with the reins.

There had been a fire in one village recently and the women knew this; they had seen the glow a week back, and now they peered intently in the direction of the gutted houses and barns.

"The livestock must have been burned too," said Aksinya, who was driving.

"You bet," said Lukerya in support, pushing some straw underneath her.

But Likonida, holding the wreath in her hands, pulled off a leaf that seemed superfluous to her, twirled it round near her lips, threw it on to the road and said miserably:

"We're silly women we are... What's the point of coming all this way?"

However, the bell-towers of the town showed up behind the dark green of the orchards, and the other two replied:

"Makes no odds; it won't be long now."

The cemetery appeared just to the left of the road as they drove up to the hospital, which was a separate building and the women said to one another:

"If we knew his name it'd be a help; we could go straight

to the cemetery. The watchman has to know the names of his dead."

They even stopped the horses, but there was no one to be seen in the cemetery or they would have asked there and then.

They rolled up to the hospital by two o'clock.

They tethered the horses at the gates and gave them an armful of hay. The grey-eyed Likonida did not want to leave the wreath in the cart: someone might steal it; there were a lot of people about. And so the three of them crossed the hospital yard, wreath and all, to inquire after the grave of the man they had brought in at night a month ago, and what his name might be.

Ordinary people only remember their own illnesses and those of their nearest and dearest during holidays; there's no time on other days. And now the three women with a wreath were wandering across the busy crowded hospital yard with the grass growing in between the cobble-stones, and they did not know whom to ask what they needed to know.

They saw a fat man in an apron and they enquired of him, but he only mumbled angrily:

"Can't you see I'm a cook?"

They met another, bare-headed, also wearing an apron and carrying a smelly bucket. He listened to them but said that he hadn't been working there long and then trotted away.

They asked a woman in white with a red cross, and she promptly asked them:

"What was his name?"

"How would we know his name, dear?"

"You don't know whom you're looking for?"

And she swept away with a rapid tap-tap of high heels.

Then they met an old woman who turned out to be the manageress of the stores. She didn't know either, but she took them to a doctor with a red moustache but no beard. He too was wearing white overalls.

He surprised them greatly.

"Died a month ago, you say?.. It's easy enough for you to say, a month ago; but how many have we got to go through, just imagine... D'you know what times these are?"

How many of them are dying here, just think! ”

“But this one of ours, he was killed,” said the woman to refresh his memory, but the doctor rolled his eyes and said:

“They’re all killed now... There aren’t any people who don’t get killed these days.”

However, he promised to consult the records.

The women took a look at their horses; they were standing there all right, champing hay. They went right round the yard: they looked at the laundry, and the kitchen and the cesspool (Likonida was still carrying the wreath) and then they went into the garden just to sit in the cool shade while the medical assistant consulted the records for them.

The garden was a tiny one, only two little avenues. A few patients were sitting on yellow benches; all were wearing white overalls, but their own peaked caps. One was lying on a folding stretcher and reading the paper, which the women even condemned, and one was sitting in a wheel-chair and looking up at the leaves; his hands were bandaged and he had a white bonnet on his head... Two patients had relatives sitting with them, and a little girl near one of them was sucking a sweet in a pink paper wrapping.

Not very boldly and holding firmly on to one another, the women walked along one of the avenues, staring at all the patients with keen country eyes: look at the patients, look at the dress with three frills that woman’s wearing; look at that girl’s brown stockings.

They passed the one who was reading the paper, and they looked him over closely, each mentally noting what thin fingers he had, like straws; however did he manage to hold the paper with them? They passed the one in the wheel-chair and looked him over. His eyes were big and deep-sunken, and his hands were tied to his neck with a white ribbon... They noticed that his wheel-chair was standing right in the sun and they thought it would be better to put it in the shade. They went on further, to the kitchen garden fence and then back again along the same avenue, past the girl with the sweet, past the stretcher, past the arm-chair on wheels.

They had pushed the kerchiefs back on their heads a little way, and Likonida was carrying the wreath like a basket in the crook of her arm. It occurred to her to have

another look at the wreath as they were approaching the wheel-chair.

"All our flowers have wilted, we brought it with us for nothing..." she said pathetically.

At this point the patient in the bonnet with his hands tied to his neck suddenly looked intently at them and said:

"Girls... Isn't it you?"

The women stopped in their tracks.

"Girls! " repeated the patient with extreme joy, his face wreathed in smiles.

"Ours... Ours... By God, it's ours!.." shrieked the women so loudly that the whole of the hospital garden could hear.

"Our own darling! And we were bringing a wreath for your grave... Here it is, as we promised..."

And it was so unexpected, and so miraculous, and so sweet, and such a shock that the women could not stay on their feet; one after the other, reverently, instinctively, they kneeled down in front of the wheel-chair.

1927

Translated by Alex Miller

ALEXANDER SERAFIMOVICH

(1863-1949)

Alexander Serafimovich—pen-name of Alexander Popov—had a long career as a writer. He was described as a “confirmed realist” by Anatoly Lunacharsky, literary critic and statesman. Serafimovich himself said, “I thoroughly grasped that ... what does not correspond to the truth always revolted me in literature... I was always afraid of suggesting something to the reader; I wanted my images, like teeth, to grip him and lead him to the right conclusions.” However, Serafimovich was “not a photographer, but a preacher,” wrote Lunacharsky, “and he preaches in images. He preaches about the horrors of life, the horrors of poverty, the horrors of forced labour, the horrors of woman’s enslavement, the horrors of ignorance, of middle-class hypocrisy and the like. At times, Serafimovich portrays these horrors so vividly that he makes painful reading. But this is unavoidable, this ‘horror’ in life petrifies the reader, like the Medusa’s head.”

His short story "Sands"(1908) and his novel "The City in the Steppe" (1912) contain a criticism of the life and mores of bourgeois society. His novel about the Civil War, "The Iron Flood" (1924), is one of the first achievements of socialist realism.

"In life and literature," recalls the writer's son, Igor Popov, "my father was always on the front line of the struggle... His work... reflect, if not all, then at least the main historical events in the life of our country, above all those of the revolutions. During his lifetime, Russia underwent the cruellest social upheavals and political changes. Serafimovich was born soon after the abolition of serfdom (1861—Ed.) ... he survived the grim reigns of three Russian tsars and fought in the imperialist war. Serafimovich was a witness of, and fiery participant in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and also the Civil War. He went through the difficult early years of the struggle for communism and believed in the future of the new society."

*TWO BROTHERS**

It's blazing hot! Everything's quivering in the heat: the parched, pale and unattainable sky, and the distant slopes likewise parched and infinitely far-reaching steppe, and the forgotten white cloudlet over the rim of earth, and the straw huts—put a match to them and everything would go up in a roar of flame. The horses frenziedly shy away from the flies and gadflies without touching the piled-up hay.

Yesterday, in the trees behind the huts, one of Wrangel's planes dropped a bomb. Two horses and the ambulance wagon were blown to bits and the Red Army men sitting peacefully over a billy-can were wounded. The nurse was killed.

I lie on my back under a mutilated, wounded pussy willow; the bark has been torn off and I look through the broken, dangling boughs at a sky bleached by the heat. Our artillery is pounding away beyond the village, making the ground tremble and the chest and head reverberate. The enemy's guns are muffled, like distant thunder; the sound is coming from where the white cloud was hanging over the horizon; shells are bursting three versts away from us over a wide-spreading gully. Our troops have taken cover in there.

The boys told me:

"Never mind, lie down. He drops a bomb and flies off. We crawl into the shade where he dropped it. He thinks we'll be scared, but he doesn't touch us; he's looking for somebody else."

The company are scattered about the farm under cover. There is a brook behind the willows—nothing but ooze, and

the pigs in it are twitching their ears to get rid of the flies. There are no villagers anywhere.

Two Red Armymen come along—young fellows. Hollow, sun-tanned cheeks. One is tall and dark with a long face, the other is blond. They don't notice me. They walk past, crunching the fallen, heat-stiffened leaves underfoot. They squat down and begin rolling cigarettes.

"You see, comrade.., I'm so cheesed off I don't care about anything any more."

The other was silent, still crouching. He ran his tongue along the paper, stuck the edges together, then bent the tube into a "dog's leg" and sprinkled in some tobacco. They lit up from one another.

"No need to shout when you aren't being flogged."

"Ah, but that's just it!.. You see... If I hadn't married her, you understand."

The blond thumped himself on the chest, as if trying to knock a hole through it. "Eh? Comrade..."

"What happened?"

The tall one, pulling calmly on his cigarette, burned the "dog's leg" almost as far as the bend.

"What can I say?"

The smaller one finished his cigarette, spat the fag-end on to the leaves, sat down, then drew up his knees and hugged them.

"What happened! If it wasn't for her..." Suddenly, he threw back his head and shouted:

"Look!.. Look!.. Must be ours!.."

The tall one also glanced up. They peered into the exhausted, heat-drained sky. An aeroplane was sailing along, its black wings spread out under the little forgotten cloud. Suddenly there was a boom and the bowels of the earth trembled; a white, slowly melting puff of smoke blossomed near the aeroplane.

The Red Armyman rose to a kneeling position with his head thrown back as before.

"Wrangell.. A-ah, the scum! "

The ground was still shaking and white puffs of smoke blossomed nearer and nearer the floating black bird of prey. A bomb burst to one side with a noise quite different from a gunshot. Evidently he couldn't stand it any more; the bird

dived into the cloud. The anti-aircraft guns were silent.

The Red Armyman hugged his knees again, and there was eternal misery in his voice, as if the enemy aeroplane had never flown past, as if the heat had been shimmering peacefully all round and the summer thunder had been rumbling drily in the distance.

"If it weren't for her... It's not as if I'd had a bit of fun and chucked her. I married her... In a word, on the level. Well, there's women here too... They make up to you, but I don't take any notice—only of her; I'd rush back to her any time. But look, this letter; she's going out with an Austrian, a POW."

"Drivell "

The Red Armyman rose to his knees.

"My father wrote it. He loves her like his own daughter. She must have got out of hand to make him write. He's never said anything before—he's straight with me."

They fell silent. I looked at the company commander. He had bowed his head and was crumpling dry leaves in his hand. "Crank! " he said. "Think you're the only one? My wife left me... With an ex-officer..."

"We-e-ll! You too?" The Red Armyman was delighted.

The other calmly began telling about his family; how he had met a girl, they had fallen in love, had begun living happily together and then ... that—ex-officer... Of course he had been bitter... "And then she comes to me. 'Forgive me,' she says, 'I don't know what came over me... I love only you...'"

"There you are! " said the Red Armyman joyously. "And what did you do?"

" 'Why,' says I, 'If you love me, let's live together.' Now everything's fine and dandy."

"That's the stuff," said the Red Armyman hastily, "that's how I'd be. If she chucked him and came back, I'd say, 'All right then, let's forget about it...'"

They sat talking quietly for a long time.

He had no family at all, that company commander. He was alone in the world. I knew him well in Moscow.

...The distant enemy battery was still pounding away. The two men got up and departed. I left too.

A Red Armyman appeared in the distance, hurrying

towards me. I recognized him. He was waving his hand.

"Get on your horse quick and leave! The Cossacks are outflanking us!.."

The company was going past. The company commander was marching with them. Could that be the one who, half an hour ago, had been sitting with a soldier under the trees? No, it wasn't him. It was and it wasn't. His face had turned to iron. I saw him, and I knew that if the recent Red Armyman, the one marching in the second platoon—if that soldier committed the slightest breach of discipline, the commander would shoot him down with his Mauser without a moment's hesitation. He saw and knew only one thing—the Cossacks slowly coming up the slope in the distance.

That evening, in the rear, where Headquarters were stationed, there were brought up the wounded (the Cossacks had been beaten off) and the dead. The wounded were being bandaged in the priest's house. The dead were lying on the yellow grass in the priest's garden until the coffins were ready.

I went into the garden. The company commander and the soldier were lying on the edge of the grass.

In my mind's eye, I can see the trees and two men sitting on their hunkers, smoking "dog's legs".

But now, with the calm tranquillity of death on their young faces, two brothers are lying side by side.

IVAN SOKOLOV-MIKITOV

(1892-1975)

Ivan Sokolov-Mikitov grew up in the family of a rich merchant's forest estate manager. "The first words I heard," recalled the writer, "were the vivid words of the people, the first music I heard was the music of folk songs, perhaps the very Smolensk songs that once inspired the great Russian composer, Glinka. From my mother I inherited my feeling for words and my restless nature, from my father, a love of nature and a poetic turn of mind."

Studies at the Smolensk Secondary School did not last long. Sokolov-Mikitov was expelled from the 5th form "on suspicion of belonging to pupils' revolutionary organizations". With this stigma, the young man had no chance of being accepted by an educational institution. Sokolov-Mikitov signed on board a merchant ship as a sailor. The romance of sea voyages, travel, many cities and many countries provided a wealth of new impressions for the future writer... The First World War found him abroad. Sokolov-Mikitov made his way back to his homeland with difficulty and went to the front as a volunteer. In February 1917, as deputy of a soldiers' committee, he arrived in Petrograd, where he welcomed the October Revolution,

heard speeches by V. I. Lenin and was introduced to Maxim Gorky, who reacted favourably to his first literary efforts.

This was the beginning of Sokolov-Mikitov's career as a writer. Many of his short stories were about the people of his native Smolensk country, "The Son", "Dust", "Honey-Scented Hay", "The Blind Ones" and others. But the main theme of his works, as the poet Vsevolod Rozhdestvensky aptly noted, was "man in nature". "He was not only a skilful and experienced explorer of untrodden forest ways, he was also a poet of the forest who knew all its secret life, all its sounds, whispers, smells and colours. He had an observant eye and a retentive memory. He saw much more than is within the range of ordinary human vision. Moreover, he had a truly magical ability to express everything in words, catching the momentary sensation forever, making it accessible and exciting to all who care to follow him into a world that is alive, flowering, vibrant, unchanging, yet changing every moment. It is the world of nature so dear to us all, warmed by the human spirit, inspired by the feeling of brotherhood and nearness to all living things that grow up on a land eternally being renewed."

ROADS*

To K. A. Fedin

We ride out of the city at dawn. A milk-white mist is spreading over the river below. From the silver sea of mist, the walls of the city cathedral rise like a vision over the dark rooftops of the houses. Far, far away, beyond the river can be heard the sound of the shepherd's horn coming from the mist, as in ancient times.

There is something pristine and phantasmagorical about all this! We cross a bridge, then an empty market square, and then turn off on to a big road. The sun hangs suspended over the meadows. The ribbon of the river is smoky with scraps of rising mist in the low-lying land, overgrown with sedge; the landrails are craking without cease. Hoary in the evening dew, tall, dense piles of fresh hay lie by the roadside. Here and there, on the open spaces of the water-meadows, the steel blade of a scythe flashes like lightning in the rays of the rising sun and suddenly goes out. From the meadows comes a mist and the honey-sweet scent of grass. Under the steep river bank, an azure blue kingfisher flies past, our bird of paradise reflected in the mirror of the water.

Silence, morning, the open countryside! We ride out on to the main road, a wide, busy thoroughfare lined with ancient, broad-branching silver birches, their trunks covered with cracked bark. Few of these trees have survived; decrepit and, it seems, fast asleep, they let their weeping branches fall down to the ground.

Also standing by the road here and there are some wooden crosses swamped by the tall grasses. According to the folk custom, these wayside crosses are used in the Smolensk country to commemorate the spots where sudden death overtook the traveller, whether he was on foot or

riding. How many terrible stories did I hear in my childhood about people who were murdered, or died on the road drunk, or were overtaken by a thunderstorm, or were drowned. A feeling of alarm was stirred by these mute memorials of sad events. I remember how piously my mother crossed herself and how we would urge on the horses as we passed a place haunted by the memory of a remote and tragic death.

Here is the familiar hewn stone rising up at the cross-roads. According to the yarns of the old men, a cheerful tavern stood here once. Their harness-bells jingling, drivers' and landowners' troikas used to roll up here; the shaggy little horses of peasants returning from the city after a spree dozed at a gnawed tethering-rail covered with peasants' coats. In the old days, instead of a written sign over the tavern roof, there was a "witches' broom", that is, a thick fir-branch which served as a beacon to revellers walking or riding past.

The road runs straight, winds, disappears amid curly birch-groves, vanishes into deep gullies and ditches overgrown with alder-trees, is dark with the rutted patches of spring and red with exposed clay. All round are hills and fields, the rye tosses and billows, the oats are tender green, the mists hover over the meadows. The sun is bright and cheerful; fluffy white clouds tinged with gold sail across the blue summer sky and their mauve shadows glide over the hills beyond the river, over the blue-grey corn... The old thatched roofs of the village are black, the virgin forests beyond the river are dark-blue; like a green island is the old village cemetery with its tall pines, the crosses awry on the graves and the steep-roofed cemetery chapel. A man is walking slowly away from the cemetery in a leather-belted blouse; his feet, bare and grey with dust, pad softly over the smooth, sun-baked road; his keen, old man's eyes stare at us with curiosity...

We drive unhurriedly along, sometimes going up the slopes on foot. The driver walks alongside with the shaft-bow, briskly slapping his dusty army boots with his knout. The bronze nape of his neck is covered with curly hair and gad-flies have settled on the faded cloth of his old soldier's blouse. More flies whirl voraciously over the horse's sweaty back, settling on its withers and chest. Baring his teeth, the

driver squashes them with his hand, wiping the dirty, bloodstained, calloused palm of his hand on his knees.

The day has turned out clear and hot, the sun is high in the sky, and a warm midday breeze whispers on the tops of the birch-trees from time to time and dies down again. It shakes the branches, wafting the scent of grass and grain from the fields; there is an odour of mushrooms in the woods, the dew is still lying under the trees here and there. Hovering in the air, a long-tailed kestrel flutters its wings over the boundary...

I look at the fields, at the trees, at the kestrel hanging suspended in mid-air and illumined by the sun. So many scenes, events, forgotten lives and stories are resurrected by these places, these roads I've known since childhood! Just here, on the other side of the river, there stood opposite the church a big, empty house with iridescent windows, the home of the Penskys, a family of noble birth. I remember the stories I once heard about the dreadful Madame Penskaya, who flogged her female servants mercilessly, and about the master, a half-crazed dwarf who used to go into the field to pray under an old oak-tree (they showed me that spreading tree in my childhood). Even the recent past seems distant, almost legendary: the rural council office on the edge of the village, the state-owned tavern surrounded by noisy drunken muzhiks, the black-bearded rural council official, Fetisych, with his little sunken eyes, the consumptive, long-necked clerk... These recent times now seem like the remote past.

The home of the Penskys has been wiped off the face of the earth, dismantled beam by beam; the rural council office has been burned down—you wouldn't find an ember now. The muzhiks razed the house of Maria the blacksmith's wife to the ground, since she had given shelter to bandits and robbers in the troubled years... The tall white bell-tower has survived from the past and, as before, the familiar road, worn by the passage of many wheels, winds across the green meadows.

We stop to feed the horse in the old Boldino Monastery. We drive through the once wealthy monastery village

with its steep timber roofs, decorative carved porches and ornate bird-houses in the trees. The monastery is surrounded by a brick wall with loopholes through which, it is said, the young monks used to sneak out at night to go with the soldiers' wives. The gates are heavy and indestructible, with a massive iron bar. The monastery was famed for the merry escapades of monks whom the church authorities banished to this out-of-the-way spot so that they might repent of their sins. There is a museum in it now and administrative stores; the cheerful green grass pushes up between the stones on the empty courtyard. The dark figure of the only surviving monk, a *skopets* who has renounced his order and has stayed on the museum premises, flits like a frightened bird round a corner of the stone building...

We do not stay long in the deserted monastery. The sun is already high in the sky and a light dust is rising over the road. The roads here wind alongside the river through woods and fields, taking you away into the dark-blue, shimmering distance.

A big, inky cloud is rising on the far side of the river. We watch it advancing from the west, a terrible swirling mass with a line of ominous, ragged tufts scudding ahead of it. The hushed air is heavy and still. As if trying to stress the onset of the calm before the storm, the grasshoppers, vying with one another, are chirruping with all their might; the foul gadflies attach themselves still more insistently to the weary horse. The sun breaking through the clouds catches our faces in its amber glow. An eddying gust of wind suddenly lifts the dust from the road and drives it into our eyes, buffets us violently, turns over the leaves on the trees and plays with the horse's burr-tangled mane. The peals of thunder are getting louder, nearer and more ominous. A vague feeling of forgotten childish horror arises in the soul.

The first drops of rain mingled with dust fall heavily on the road and on the dusty sides of the cart. Urging on the horse, we drive as long as the rain allows, then, hurriedly tethering the horse to a fence, we shelter under the trees in the forest. The tree-tops sway menacingly and creak dismally overhead. The lightning flashes follow one another without cease, the thunder rumbles, the nearest peals begin

with a crack, after which the rain suddenly comes down even harder.

Waiting for the storm to pass, we stay for a long time in the forest under the trees. Then, wet, almost soaked to the skin, we go out over the rain-flattened grass to the now flooded road. Darkened by the rain, the horse whinnies a joyful welcome. Far, far away over the fields, grey clouds of smoke are rising into the air. It is a village barn burning, hit by the recent storm. The ominous dark cloud is slowly receding, the lightning flashes less and less frequently, the thunder rumbles further and further away. In front of us, over the road, over the rain-washed birch-grove, the clear blue sky high up has already opened and, as if nothing had happened, light, airy clouds are floating slowly across the clear blue. The grove is a joyfully, festive fragrant green and the trunks of the wet birch-trees are like young brides. A torrent of turbid rainwater rushes along the road, washing the revolving spokes of the wheels.

A lively herd of young horses comes galloping out of a young birch-grove to meet us. The well-fed foals frolic about and sweep over the meadow, throwing out their tails like trumpets, smashing the mirror-like puddles with their hooves. The sun plays on their glossy wet backs and glistens on the white trunks of the birches. We go through half-ruined stone gates into an ancient park and drive along under the trees that shed occasional raindrops on to the road, and then we stop at the entrance to an old, palatial manor house. We tether the horse and ascend the wide steps.

This enormous residence once belonged to the wealthiest people in our district, the famous Baryshnikovs, a noble family whose possessions were almost past numbering. There is now a state stud-farm on the premises, an estate museum has been founded, and new people of a different kind live and work here.

There is a deathly silence in the upstairs rooms, now the museum. Dark, damply glistening portraits hang on the high, dusty walls. The lofty windows are grimy and dim; layers of dead autumn flies have accumulated between the frames, which have not been taken out for a long time. The air in the rooms is heavy and grave-like. We walk through

empty rooms furnished with chairs, armchairs and tall escriptoires. Albums and faded photographs lie on the round tables. In the big wall-cupboards I can see the brown spines of leather-bound tomes and piles of letters tied with faded satin ribbons. I take out one letter and read; it is written in an ornate, old-fashioned script on thick grey paper. What a remote, alien, forever buried world!..

Here, in these rooms, generations of people were born, lived and died. They held the fate of many human beings in their hands. I remember the story of the farmer and founder of the famous Baryshnikov family, the son of a simple artisan, who, according to the legend preserved among the people, acquired the gold obtained by Field-Marshal Apraksin as a bribe from the King of Prussia (this gold, according to tradition, was delivered in herring barrels). I remember the romantic history of one Baryshnikov, a remarkable but obscure artist whose mother was a simple peasant woman, the daughter of a serf-gilder. He was subsequently adopted and raised in Munich by his eminent father, who often brought guests to stay with him in the backwoods of the Smolensk country—famous German artists whose pictures of Russian country life now hang in European art galleries... Stories are still told about the last serf-owner of the Baryshnikov family, a fat man, a practical joker and a debauchee who stopped at nothing in his disgraceful escapades. The old men tell how once, meeting a serf carting tar on the highroad, he ordered the man under the threat of cruel punishment to jump three times into his own tar-barrel. Once, riding to town for the elections of the nobility, he happened to see his neighbour, a poor landowner, swimming in a pool. He ordered the coachman to stop and, summoning his naked neighbour, who got out of the water, modestly covering himself with his hands, he forced the man into the carriage and rushed him in the likeness of Adam into the city to a big assembly of the nobility. It was also said of him that just before he died, he jumped up off his death-bed and, loaded pistol in hand, chased after a famous German physician brought from Moscow, shouting at the top of his voice: "You'll die first, you German dolt, but I'll still live to flog my muzhiks!.." There were many such tales about the pranks of this capricious master... Old

letters kept in the secret drawers of the escritoirs tell how the artist Baryshnikov was loved by his young neighbour, Begicheva, who remained true to this one and only passion all her life. The museum curator, a passionate lover of the past, makes a special point of stopping before her portrait, painted by the artist himself. In the oval gilt frame we see the friendly, beautiful face of a girl with slightly slanting, upcurving Tatar eyebrows and with a white satin quilted jacket over her still childish shoulders. She has a bare, slender neck and is wearing the white blossom of a wild eglantine behind her delicate little ear. All this now seems irrevocably far away; the old love letters are redolent of dust and mould; but many people in the town know that, quite recently, already at a great age, the beauty in the portrait died, still faithful to her first and last love; and that the last of the wealthy Baryshnikovs, a solitary old maid, is ending her days in the little neighbouring town, living off charity and selling the remains of her property. But the stone palace, built by the serf-architect Semyon, will stand there for a long time to come, with its colonnades and its English park, the big lakes on which the last swan died recently and, on the shores of the lake, the old birches in which the herons build their nests... Much more could be told by the letters and writings, but I am not one for rum-maging about in old papers. These museum rooms are like burial vaults to me, with their gleaming windows, with the portraits glistening dully on the wall and with the thick layer of dead flies between window-frames that are not taken out any more. It is more pleasant to go outside into the summer sunshine and the light breeze bearing the fragrance of grass and flowers; to breathe in the air with a full chest, to hear the whistle of the oriole, to see living, cheerful, laughing human beings, to be jolted along a dusty country road across the fields and through the forests.

We walk round all the rooms and then go up to the nursery, from which there is a view of the lake and the weed-choked garden, with a tethered calf grazing on the neglected flower-beds. But even more beautiful and luxuriant is the old park, and the lake, too, is wonderful with its islands, the derelict summer-houses, banks and impenetrable woods.

Flowers, long untended and running wild, trail forlornly over the crumbling brick wall...

We go out into the park. A tall, white-haired old man comes towards us along the avenue. He stops and engages us in conversation, his faded, deep-sunken eyes are still keen, the withered dark fingers of the senile hands hold the worn stick with a firm grip. He knows everything; he has outlived three generations of masters and remembers the times of serfdom well. We look at him as at a living wonder, at his hands, at the thin white beard, at the lustreless eyes that have seen long-departed people we never knew.

In the evening, I wander alone round the park and listen to the nightingales, and the frogs, and the herons clamouring over the pond. I come back late and walk along the corridor, my footsteps echoing with a hollow, desolate sound. We spend the night in the hunting-room, which is hung with bearskins, skulls, and reindeer and elk antlers. We stay awake all night, smoking and listening uneasily to the mysterious nocturnal noises, to the squeak and rustle of mice behind the cupboards...

How long it seems, that sleepless, heavy night. When the dawn appears in the windows, I understand the cause of our insomnia and vague night fears and I open the long-shut window. Putty flies from the frame on to the floor. The air bursts into the room, smelling of mist, morning freshness and the leafy dewiness of the park. I breathe and I cannot inhale enough of that fresh, revivifying morning air from the meadows...

We drive away when the bright sun is rising over the earth again. We drive past the pond, the half-ruined bridge, the stone outhouses with peeling, pale yellow paint and come out on to the meadow. There is a light breeze out there already blowing straight into our faces, gently stirring the grasses and bringing the scent of flowers. Once again, the winding, sun-warmed, dusty road takes us away into the distance.

1929-1954

Translated by Alex Miller

ALEXANDER GRIN

(1880-1932)

Alexander Grin—pen-name of Alexander Grinevsky. The course of his life abounded in sharp turns and ups and downs, people were intrigued by his past and wove legends and fables round his person. The colourful, fantastic world of his stories and the exotic names of places and personages made everyone imagine that the author's own life must have been as colourful and exciting. But the truth is that the creator of this fantastic world, full of incredible adventures and thrilling mysteries, was born into the family of a petty official in Vyatka Gubernia. His mother died, and since his early childhood he lived in poverty and loneliness, "My playmates disliked me, and I had no friends," Grin wrote. From his daily cares and misery he escaped into a dream world, where dwelt kind, good people, where Beauty and Fairness always triumphed and where extraordinary adventures awaited everyone at every step. At 16 he left home to roam the length and breadth of Russia, taking up different jobs to keep body and soul together: he was a carpenter, a wood-cutter, a gold-digger, an actor, a copyist of parts for the theatre, and even a bath-house attendant. He landed in jail for running away from the army, and was banished for his revolutionary convictions. And all the time he dreamed of voyages round the world, of strange lands, seas and oceans. In his "Autobiog-

raphical Story" he says: "With no ability for military service, no flair for work, a narrow-chested, feeble youngster who had no knowledge of life or people, I did not worry too much about my future. I was certain that any ship would take me on as a sailor right away and I'd sail off on a round-the-world voyage." Actually, he did become a sailor, for a very short time, it is true, and only once visited a foreign port.

Grin wrote short stories, novels, articles, feuilletons and poems. Many of the things he wrote were weak, written hurriedly for money. In his lifetime critics more often than not compared him to Edgar Allan Poe and remarked on his alienation from the traditions of Russian classical literature.

However, the humanistic keynote of his writings, his desire to bring real life closer to the ideal are consonant with the general spirit and basic tone of Russian literature. "When I really understood that I was an artist, that I wanted and could be one, when the magic power of art touched me, I knew that never, till the end of my days, would I betray art. Neither money, career, nor vanity could push me off my true road, I was a writer and a writer I would die," Grin said proudly in the last years of his life.

THE PORT COMMANDANT*

I

It was already dark when the Commandant mounted the brightly illuminated ladder of the freighter the *Record*. He was a person of seventy-two and very popular in the harbour—an erect, slightly-built old man. His little face, as wrinkled as a dried pear, was meticulously shaven. Grey side-burns stuck out like the fins of a fish; from under the grey visors of his brows, small blue eyes glittered in a pleasant smile. In the bright electric light the Commandant's sailor's cap, brown pea-jacket, white trousers, blue tie, and cheap cane evidenced their shabbiness, which no amount of assiduous mending could remove from them. The Commandant's yellow boots, which had split twenty-two times, had just as often been sewn together with thread or reinforced with bits of wire. A piece of tightly sewn-on coloured silk peered from the breast pocket of his jacket.

Having thoughtfully touched his collar and then wriggled his shoulders in order to overcome a recalcitrance on the part of his suspenders, the old man stopped before the officer of the watch and abruptly spread out his arms, tilting his head to one side.

"Tom Laston!" exclaimed the Commandant in a cheerful, tremulous voice. "I just knew that on this fine ship I would see you again, dreaming of your dear Betsy, who is there ... far away. Thunder and lightning! I hope that the voyage is going well?"

"Cutgey!" Laston shouted into the distance. "The Commandant's come. What now?"

"Throw him out of his ear!" came the firm reply.

The old man's glance conveyed pleading, bewilderment,

and skittishness. His cane went up and down, like a dog's tail when it is trying to grasp its master's mood.

"Now really, why be so hard on him?" responded Laston, good-naturedly clapping the old man on the shoulder, which caused the Commandant to squat down as though he were collapsible. "I think, Cutgey, that you'll want to say hello to him. Don't be afraid, Commandant, Cutgey's joking."

"Who's joking?" said Cutgey, the chief stoker, a bony and broad-shouldered man, as he walked up to them. "Whenever you arrive in Gerton, the Commandant's sure to turn up. It's gotten tiresome. You ought to go to bed, old man."

"I've just come from the *Abraham Repp*," the old man began to babble, trying not to hear the stoker's unpleasant words. "Everything's in order there. They had a good turn, at dawn the *Repp* is sailing away. I drank coffee and played checkers with the bosun Tolby. A wonderful fellow! How are you, Cutgey? I hope that everything's in order? Your esteemed family?"

"Have a smoke," said Cutgey and thrust a black cigarette onto the old man. "Hold it tightly, or else you'll drop it."

"Ah, here's Mr. Captain!" the Commandant cried out, excitedly adjusting his jacket and running up to the captain, who was off to the theatre with his wife. "Good evening, Mr. Captain! And good evening, most esteemed... hm... The evening is so nice that one wants to stroll along the esplanade and listen to the wonderful music. How are you? I hope that all's in order? You haven't had to ride out a storm, have you? Your health ... is it excellent?"

"Oh, it's you, Tils," said Captain Henry Halton, coming to a stop; he was a tall man of about thirty-five with a large, weather-beaten face. "You're still holding out—very good! I'm glad to see you. However, we're in a hurry, and so take this dollar and get yourself over to Butler in the galley; gab for a bit there. All the best. Mary, this is the Commandant."

"Is that who you are?" smiled the young woman. "The Port Commandant? I've heard about you."

"They all know me!" Tils let out a loud, old man's cackle, holding the cigarette in one hand and the dollar and the cane in the other. "Sailors are great people, and our

likings, I hope, are mutual. I must say that I adore sailors. I'm drawn to a ship's deck... like... like... like..."

Not waiting to hear the rest, the captain took his wife ashore, while Tils politely lifted his cap after them and turned to Laston:

"A fine fellow, your captain! A real whale of a chap. From his head to his toes."

Here it must be explained that the Commandant (this was his nickname) was known positively everywhere in the harbour, from the most disreputable inn to the customs bureau. Tils had worked his entire life as clerk in the warehouse of a large private firm, but was finally dismissed on grounds that resulted from his venerable age. Since then he had been supported by his widowed sister, with whom he lived—the childless, fifty-year-old Rebecca Bartles.

Epilepsy had kept Tils from becoming a sailor, and although attacks of it ceased as he became old, he remained a sailor only in his imagination. In the morning his sister would shove a large sandwich into the pocket of his jacket and give him ten cents for odd expenses; brandishing a cane, the Commandant would begin his rounds of the port. He did not pursue any mercenary ends; he had been attracted to ships and sailors from childhood—ever since, while still in his mother's arms, he had stretched out his little hands towards the vision of sails descending along the blue wall of the sea.

After he had lit up the cigarette with a trembling, dried-out hand, the Commandant set out with small regular steps for the galley, where the cock, catching sight of his brows and side-burns, burst into loud laughter.

"I knew that you'd show up, Tils," he said finally, moving a stool towards him and filling a mug with coffee from the pot. "Where've you been? You must've missed the *Stella*; it's sitting beyond the oil jetty, opposite the factory. This very minute they're playing cards and drinking over there."

"Not so fast, not so fast, esteemed Peter Butler," Tils answered with a sigh and, moving the stool up to the table, sat down, with his hands folded on the crook of his cane. "How is your esteemed health? Was it a good run? Your esteemed spouse, I hope, is calmly awaiting your return?"

Hm... I've already been on the *Stella*. They hadn't yet begun playing then, but had just sent the supercargo to buy a pack of cards. Yes. But I soon went away, you know, because there are two individuals there who treat me... well, yes ... not amicably. They said that I'm an importunate old loafer and that... Naturally I got upset and couldn't express to them my love of everything ... of gallant sailors ... of the deck... But I always have that, and you know..."

Tils became sad and gave a sob. Butler reached into a locker and banged a small bottle of pineapple liqueur on the table.

"An old salt like you has to down a glassful," said Butler. "Right? Let's drink up and forget those scoundrels. Your health! My health! Allo! Hup! "

Butler tossed a half cup of the drink into his fleshy mouth, wiped his lower lip with his thumb, and stared concentratedly at Tils, who, when he had slowly sucked in his glassful, made a movement with his lips, as though he wanted to say "a-am". After wiping his watering eyes and blowing his nose, Tils began to pull on the extinguished cigarette.

"Another one?"

"No thanks. Maybe later. Thunder and lightning! The *Stella* is a good ship, very good," said Tils, and his head gave a feeble shake with each word. "They launched her in 1901. Cherley no longer works on the *Siren*; I saw him yesterday in Marley's hotel. 'I'll have a rest,' he says. 'The fact is,' says Cherley, 'I have a bone to pick with the firm; they haven't paid me in full.' Today I was in the *Black Bull*; I stopped off to ask what's what. Everything's fine. Rumper moved his tavern to the other corner, because that building was sold for a store. Watson simply can't get a pension; how awful! He drinks, let lightning strike me, he drinks wonderfully, like a camel or a sea serpent. It's pleasant to watch. He'll take a mug and look at it. 'In the Philippines,' says Watson, 'yes,' he says, 'there used to be some goings on. It's nice,' he says, 'in Jamaica.' The *Royal Star* sank. They're saying that it ran into a cyclone. Balls of fire! Did you know Simon Legree? The pirate? Simon Legree was a pirate, and he once entertained me after ... a certain affair. This is what he said: 'They wouldn't have

sunk the *Notch*,' he says, 'if the Devil himself hadn't helped them.' Then he began to swear so that everyone grew thoughtful. He was a fine man, that Legree, I'll say it for him! Thunder and lightning! Then I said to him: 'You know what, Legree, take me on. For boardings! Hip, hip, hurray! For life and death!' But he was busy with something and didn't listen. Then the *Notch* would not be lost. When I'm about seven the Devil..."

"Of course, Commandant," said Laston, appearing in the galley's doors, "you would have made them shape up."

"Naturally," confirmed Tils. "Very much so indeed. Naturally."

When he had drunk another glass Tils became animated. Evidently, he had no intention of going away soon and began to enumerate all kinds of meetings, mixing up his own thoughts with what he had heard and seen during his long life. He was not drunk, but only garrulous, and felt like a robust young man ready to sail to the ends of the earth. However, he had already twice called the cook Señor Ribeira, taking him for the chief mechanic on the steamship *Grenel*, and had called Laston "Herr Bauman", likewise confusing him with the bosun of the schooner *Bolivia*, and then the cook decided that it was time to send the Commandant away. There was only one method of doing this, but the Commandant would submit to it without protest. With a wink at the cook Laston said:

"Well, Commandant, go help our lads moor to the *Pilgrim*. In a minute we'll be changing moorings."

Tils shrank back and slowly glanced at Laston from under his brows; then he nervously straightened his collar.

"I know the *Pilgrim*," Tils began to babble in a pathetic voice. "It's a very good ship. In 1914 two holes on the reefs near Cape Hunger ... speed of twelve knots... Naturally."

"Get going, Tils; give our lads a hand," said the cook in mock seriousness.

The Commandant slowly pulled down the peak of his cap and stood up, tearing himself away from the stool with difficulty. The clearly-imagined thickness of the massive cables drove the old man's jingling tipsiness out of his head; he became cold and tired.

"I'd better go home," said Tils, swiftly smiling at Butler

and Laston, who, with their arms folded on their chests and their eyes half-closed, sat in front of him importantly. "Yes, I must, since I promised not to stay away later than eight. Make the mooring, lads, rock your trough onto the *Pilgrim*. Ha-ha! Have a good game. I'm off..."

"This is a pretty cattle of fish," exclaimed Butler. "You're off! Really, Commandant, the lads and bosun are returning in a minute; come on now, help us."

"No, no, no. I must, I must be going," Tils hastened, "because I promised, you understand, to come earlier."

"And where are you going now?" said the young sailor Schenk as he came in.

"Hello, young man! Was the voyage good? The health of your esteemed..."

"...Mother, lest you be mistaken—she's excellent. But that's beside the point. If you want, drop by the Sea Club. A girl named Peggy Scotter works at the buffet there."

"Peggy Scotter?" mumbled Tils, reviving somewhat and not even frightened any more of the *Record's* thick cables. "Of course I know her. An excellent girl, I swear, may they shoot me in the heart! I know her, I tell you."

"Then tell her that her friend Willy Brant died of the plague in Hainaut a month ago. The *Cock's Comb* just came in; a sailor from it was in the Eureka, where our fellows were sitting, and told us about it. Who is to tell her? Nobody. Everyone's afraid. How can one tell her about this? She'll begin crying. But you can do it, Tils. You're a steadfast person and old like an hour-glass; you know how to do things. Isn't that right?"

"That's right," said Laston resolutely, moving his foot.

"That's right," Butler agreed after a short silence.

"Just be sure you do it straight off. Don't torture her with suspense. Don't put your tail between your legs," instructed Schenk.

"Yes, it is much worse when you drag it out," Butler confirmed. "Out with it and off you go."

Lips pursed, the old man lowered his head. The sailors' breathing—measured and heavy, as though at work—was alone audible.

"The fact of the matter is that from you," Schenk resumed, "it will be all the same as the whisper of a tree, or like

the ticking of a clock: 'Brant-died of-the plague-in Hai-naut'. It's easier that way. And if I go, it will be unseemly, you know. I'll have to get drunk for such an occasion".

"Yes, straight off," Tils shouted hoarsely and stamped his foot. "Boldly and courageously. The heart of that devil of a wench is steel. A real sea hoof. I promise you, Schenk, and you, Butler, and you, Laston. I'll do it at once."

II

Peggy Scotter was busy at tea buffet in the lower hall of the club, to the right of the vestibule. She was a stocky but well-proportioned girl, with freckles and a snub nose; her grey eyes had a serious and questioning look, while her dark-red hair, fastened on the back of her neck with a dozen strong pins, shone like well-polished bronze.

When for the tenth time her helper had begun to study the cut of her boss's sleeve, which was trimmed with lace, Peggy caught sight of Tils. He approached the buffet in a semi-circle, often stopping and politely bowing to the customers whom he knew.

"Look, Melly, the Commandant's come," said Peggy, sorting the biscuits on a large earthenware plate. "He's heading over here. Well, well, get a move on, you old chatterbox!"

Bowing to Peggy while still some distance away Tils stepped right up to the counter. Peggy looked at him inquiring with her glance about old age and the labours of the day and she smiled at his solemnly mysterious face.

"Hello, my esteemed, radiant like always..." said Tils, but then he began to blink and softly finished: "I hope that the voyage was good ... excuse me, that's not it. A wonderful evening, I dare say. How are you?"

"Do you want one, Commandant?" said Peggy, holding out a biscuit for him. "Eat to the health of William Brant. You asked about him recently. He'll be returning soon. That's what he wrote two weeks ago. When he comes I'll put a decanter of marvellous rum on that table for you ... without tea, and I'll sit down myself, but for now, you know, step back, because when the waiters come running with their trays they'll jostle you."

"Thank you," said Tils, slowly shoving the biscuit into his pocket. "Yes ... when Brant comes. Peggy! Peggy!" he suddenly burst out.

But he did not say anything else; only his wrinkled cheeks quivered. His gaze was moist and confused.

Peggy was surprised, for the Commandant had never allowed himself to be so familiar. She looked at him intently and even bent over.

Tils could not muster his courage to finish what he had to say—he couldn't have a woman's terrible cry ring out through the entire hall from behind this cheerful buffet with its cheerful flowers and beautiful crockery. He nervously swallowed the breath of air which, had he let it out, could have struck Peggy down with the words bearing the truth about her Brant, and he cowardly began to trot away, bowing with a twist from the front to the back like an unsteadily spinning top.

Peggy did not discuss the cut of the sleeve with Melly any more. Something strange remained in her brain as a result of Tils's words, "Peggy! Peggy!" She thought about Brant a whole hour, became gloomy, like an extinguished lamp, and finally struck her fist against the marble surface of the bar.

"What a fool I am for not having stopped him!" grumbled Peggy. "He's somehow made me uneasy."

"Don't you realize that the Commandant's drunk?" said Melly. "He was reeking. I could smell it."

Then Peggy cheered up, but from that moment on a black spot lodged in her thoughts, and, when the girl received the sad news in writing from Tils's sister several days later, this black spot served as a spring which softened the heavy blow.

"Here I am, my girl," said Tils, when he finally showed up at home, to the old woman who sat at a sewing-machine in a corner of the room. "I'm very tired. All, it seems, is well; everyone's in good health. The voyage was good. I was on *La Traviate*, the *Stella*, the *Abraham Repp*, and the *Record*. I met Captain Halton. 'Hello,' the captain says to me. 'Well done,' he says, 'good lad, Tils. You can still hold a sail to the wind.' He invited me to the theatre. However I'm shy in loud company. We had a drink. He gave me a

biscuit, a dollar, and this... No, I'm mistaken, Peggy Scotter gave me the biscuit. Her fiancé died. An unpleasant assignment, but I bravely fulfilled it. You can't imagine the tears, the screaming... I left."

"You didn't tell Peggy anything, brother," replied Rebecca. "I know you well. Go to bed. If you're hungry, take some meat-balls from the bowl on the shelf."

A year passed. The *Record* came again. But the Commandant did not come—he had died from a coughing fit when he choked on some soup. Tils coughed and gasped for so long that a blood vessel burst in his feeble throat; the old man grew weak, lay down, and after two days expired.

"Something's missing," said Laston to Butler as evening fell. "Who'll relate the various news items to us now?"

He had scarcely uttered these words when a tall, brazen, red-faced fellow, wild-looking and barefooted, hurriedly came onto the deck and then entered the crew's quarters.

"Hello! " he yelled, waving his wild-looking hat. "How was the trip, sailors? Was the voyage good? Is your family still alive? Come, come! Treat me to a glassful! "

"Who are you?" asked Butler.

"The Port Commandant! Tils kicked the bucket; well... I've taken his place."

Laston smiled grimly, silently stood up, and silently took the fellow by an elbow and dragged him off onto the embankment roadway.

"Here's where you get off," he said. "And don't show up again."

"I like that! " cried out the fellow when he had moved a safe distance away. "If somebody's stolen your boots, don't you buy new ones? And I wanted to do you a good turn—thieves, rascals, scoundrels, shark bait! "

"No, no," Laston, not offended by the fool, answered from the deck. "An obvious forgery. Your jaws will never ask 'Was the voyage good?' the way it should be asked."

ISAAC BABEL

(1894-1941)

Isaac Babel became known to a wide readership in 1921 when the magazine LEF published his short stories "The Letter", "Salt", "How This Was Done in Odessa" and others. Babel's first tales appeared in print much earlier, in 1916, but did not attract any particular interest among the critics or the readers. Maxim Gorky, however, drew attention to the new writer. "He read everything, rejected everything," as Babel himself recalled, "and he demanded more."

Details of Babel's life occur throughout his work: "My father insisted that I should study Hebrew, the Bible and the Talmud until I was sixteen." At the Odessa Commercial College, under the guidance of Monsieur Vadon, he "learned ... the French classics" and at fifteen he began writing stories in French... He welcomed the Revolution with enthusiasm and from 1917 to 1924, on Gorky's advice,

"went among the people" to roam round Russia and study the language of simple folk. Babel's marvellous knowledge of the various Russian provinces, on the one hand, and on the other, his love for the realistic trend in French literature are apparent in his best stories. He felt "more comfortable" in the short story than in any other kind. His book "The Cavalry Army" (1926), about the Civil War, consisted of 34 short stories published in Odessa magazines and newspapers.

Babel's prose is not simple, however. According to Soviet critic Fyodor Levin, "naturalism of many scenes and pictures is conspicuous in Babel's work... Restrained, succinct, economical descriptive passages are offset by intricate or boldly contrasting images, similes and metaphors reminiscent of the early symbolists..."

"There's lots of news, as always... Shabsovich has been given a bonus for cracking; he goes about dressed up to the nines in foreign clothes and the management have been promoted. On hearing about the appointment, everybody realized that the lad has grown up at last ... on this occasion, I've stopped meeting him. The 'grown-up' lad felt that he knew the truth that is hidden from us ordinary mortals and put on such an air of success and orthodoxy (orthoboxing, as Kharchenko says) that nothing shakes him... We saw one another two days ago and he asked me why I didn't congratulate him. Who, I answered, was I to congratulate? Him or Soviet power?.. He understood, hedged and said, 'Give us a ring...' His wife immediately got the wind of this. Phone-call yesterday. 'Klavdyusha, we're attached to the Town Trade Directorate. If you need any underlinen...' I answered that I hoped to live until the world revolution with my own ration-book...

"Now, about myself. Let it be known unto you that I'm business manager of the Oil Syndicate.

"I was earmarked for it long ago, but I refused. My reasons were an incapacity of office work and then the desire to go to the Industrial Academy... The matter came up before the bureau four times; I had to agree, and I don't regret it now... There's a clear picture of the enterprise from here, I've managed to get something done. I've been organizing an expedition to our part of Sakhalin. I've stepped up the surveys and I'm very busy with the Oil Institute. Zinaida is with me. She's fit; she's going to have a baby soon and she's had a lot of ups and downs... She mentioned her pregnancy to her Max Alexandrovich (I call him Max-and-Moritz) too

late; she was over four months gone. He simulated rapture, planted an icy kiss on Zinaida's brow and then let it be understood a great scientific discovery lay before him, his thoughts were far from the real world, and he couldn't imagine anyone more unsuitable for family life than himself, Max Alexandrovich Sholomovich; but, of course, he would never hesitate to renounce anything, etc. etc. etc... Zinaida, being a woman of the twentieth century, burst into tears, but kept her character. She couldn't sleep that night, gasping for breath and craning her neck. At the first glimmer of dawn, dishevelled, looking ghastly in an old skirt, she rushed to the State Metallurgical Works Project Institute and told him that she wanted him to forget yesterday's conversation; she would destroy the child, but would never forgive people for it... All this happened in the institute corridor, in the crush. Max-and-Moritz went red in the face, then white, and muttered:

"We must have a chat over the telephone and meet..."

"Zinaida didn't wait for him to finish; she flew to me and announced, 'I'm not going in to work tomorrow!'"

I blew up, didn't see why I should restrain myself and gave her a stiff talking-to... Just think, a girl in her thirties, not exactly beautiful, a decent man wouldn't look at her twice, but this Max-and-Moritz had turned up and, not because of her, but because of her alien race, her aristocratic ancestors, he'd put her in the family way; now let her have the kid and bring it up. The results of mixed marriages with Jews are very good, as we know—just look at Anya's, for example. Yes, and when else are they going to have children except when their stomach muscles are still strong and they can still breast-feed? Then comes the same answer to everything: 'I can't bear the idea of my child not having a father.' In other words, the nineteenth century continues; Papa the general will emerge from his study bearing an icon and will utter a curse (or without the icon, I don't know how they used to curse in those days); they spirit the girl's baby off to an orphanage or to a wet nurse in the country...

"'Rubbish, Zinaida,' I tell her, 'don't be so old-fashioned; we'll do without Max-and-Moritz...'"

"Before I'd finished speaking, I was called to a meeting.

By that time, the problem of Victor Andreyevich had become urgent. A resolution had come from the Central Committee that, instead of the former version of the Five-Year Plan, oil extraction in 1932 was to be raised to 40 million tons. The planners, that is, Victor Andreyevich, were to work out the details. He locked himself in, then sent for me and showed me his letter. It was addressed to the Presidium of the All-Union Council for the National Economy. Gist: I resign from my responsibility for the planning department. I consider the figure of forty million tons arbitrary. It is proposed to extract over a third from unprospected regions, which means not just counting the chickens before they've been hatched, but even before the eggs have been laid... Furthermore, from the three cracking plants operating today, we are jumping, according to the new plan, to a hundred and twenty in the last year of the Five-Year Plan. And this with a shortage of metal when the highly complex process of building cracking plants has not yet been mastered by us here... The letter ended as follows: 'Like all mortals, I favour fast tempos, but a sense of duty...' etc. etc. I read it through.

"Should I send it or not?" he asked.

"Victor Andreyevich," I said, "I find your reasons and your whole attitude unacceptable, but I do not consider myself entitled to advise you to conceal your views..."

"He sent the letter off. The people in the Council flew off the handle. A meeting was held. They sent Bagrinovsky to represent them. They had put up on the wall a map of the Soviet Union with the new deposits, derricks and oil and gas pipelines.

"A country with a new circulation of the blood," as Bagrinovsky put it.

"At the meeting, young engineers of the 'omnivorous' type demanded that Victor Andreyevich should eat dust. I made a speech that lasted forty-five minutes. 'Without entertaining any doubts about the knowledge and goodwill of Professor Klossovsky, and even with respect, we eschew the fetishism of figures in thrall to which he finds himself'—that's how I stated the case.

"We shall reject the multiplication table as a criterion of state wisdom... On the basis of the stark figures, would it

have been possible to say that we would fulfil the oil extraction Five-Year Plan in two and a half years?.. On the basis of stark figures, could it have been said that after 1981 we would increase exports nine times and come second only to the United States?’

“After me, Muradyan spoke critically about the routing of the Caspian-Moscow oil pipelines. Victor Andreyevich took notes in silence. There was senile flush on his cheeks, the flush of veinous blood... I felt sorry for him, didn’t wait until the speaker had finished and went back to my quarters. Zinaida was still sitting in the office with her hands clasped.

“‘Are you going to have the baby or not?’ I asked.

“She looked at me blankly, her head swaying, and spoke; but there was no resonance in her voice.

“‘There are two of us, Klavdyusha,’ she said. ‘I and my grief, like a millstone round my neck. And how quickly everything’s forgotten. I don’t even remember any more how people live without being unhappy...’

“As she said this her nose stuck out even more and turned red, her peasant cheekbones (the gentry have such cheek-bones) became more prominent... Max-and-Moritz, I thought, wouldn’t go crazy about you if he saw you looking like that... I shouted at her and sent her into the kitchen to peel potatoes... Don’t laugh, if you come down, we’ll make you peel potatoes too. They’ve given such deadlines for the planning of the Orsk factory that the design office and the draughtsmen are sitting up day and night; Vassyona fixes them herring and potatoes for dinner, fries some scrambled eggs, and they keep plodding on... So she went into the kitchen. A minute later, I heard a cry and ran up. My Zinaida was lying on the floor, no pulse, only the whites of her eyes showing... I can’t describe how we fussed over her, Victor Andreyevich, Vassyona and myself. We called the doctor. She recovered consciousness in the night and touched my hand. You know Zina’s extraordinary tenderness. I could see that everything inside her had been burned out during the last few hours and had all been born again... We oughtn’t to lose any more time.

“‘Zinusha,’ I said, ‘we’ll ring up Rosa Mikhailovna (she’s still our confidante in these matters) and tell her you’ve

changed your mind and you won't be going to her... May I ring her?"

"She signalled her assent. On the divan near her sat Victor Andreyevich, feeling her pulse all the time. I went out, but I was listening and could hear him say:

"I'm sixty-five years old, Zinusha, my shadow's getting fainter on the ground. I'm a scientist, an old man, and now God (always God!) has arranged for the last five years of my life to coincide with this—well, you know what, this Five-Year Plan... Now I shan't get any rest till I die, I shan't be able to think about myself... And if my daughter didn't come to me in the evenings, and pat me on the shoulder, and if my sons didn't write letters to me, I can't tell you how sad I would be... Have the baby, Zinusha; Klavdia Pavlovna and I will take it under our wing.'

"While the old man was chuntering away, I rang Rosa Mikhailovna to tell that well, my dear Rosa Mikhailovna, Murashova promised to go tomorrow, but she's changed her mind... A breezy voice over the telephone:

"Brilliant, if she's changed her mind, simply wonderful...'

"The confidante's the same as ever: a pink silk blouse, an English skirt, hair-do, showers, physical jerks, admirers...

"We drove Zinaida home. I put her into a warm bed and brewed some tea. We slept side by side, wept a bit, remembered what would have been better forgotten, talked everything over, mingled our tears and went to sleep... My 'Devil' was quietly working. He was translating a technical book from the German. You wouldn't recognize the 'Devil', Dasha; because he's become humble, he's shrivelled up and quietened down. It worries me... He knocks himself out all day in Gosplan and then translates in the evening.

"Zinaida's going to have a baby,' I tell him. 'What shall we call the little boy?' (No one dreams of it being a girl.) We've settled for Ivan. We're fed up with Yuris and Leonids. He'll be a bit of a rascal, no doubt, with sharp teeth—teeth enough for sixty people. We've got the fuel laid by for him; he'll be taking the girls for rides somewhere or other, to Yalta, to Batumi—not like us, only as far as Sparrow Hills. So long, Dasha. 'Devil' will write separately. How are things with you?

Klavdia"

"P. S. I'm scribbling this at work; there's a racket going on overhead and the plaster's falling off the ceiling. Our house is still solid; apparently they're building another four storeys on to the four we've already got. Moscow is all dug up, trenches everywhere, piles of pipes and bricks; the tramlines are all criss-crossed. Machines from abroad are waving their trunks about, tramping down, rumbling, there's a smell of tar, and there's smoke everywhere, as if there'd been a fire... I saw one lad on Varvorskaya Square yesterday... Broad face, shiny red shaved head, an unbelted Russian blouse, sandals on his bare feet. He and I jumped from hummock to hummock, from mound to mound, crawled out, fell in again.

"'Here it is, the battle's started,' he says to me. 'The real front's in Moscow now, Missy, the real war...'

"A good face, smiling like a child. That's how I see him in my mind's eye..."

1931

Translated by Alex Miller

MIKHAIL ZOSHCHENKO

(1895-1958)

Mikhail Zoshchenko was born in the Ukrainian city of Poltava. His boyhood coincided with the years of the First World War. He spent two years at the front and was awarded four battle Orders. He returned to Petrograd after the October Revolution.

Mikhail Zoshchenko's first book of short stories came out in 1921.

His literary destiny was complex and contradictory. His early work is often compared to that of Leskov: the same narrative style, total detachment of the writer from his hero, who describes his environment and life from his own point of view; finally, the choice of a hero, usually a simple character who loses his bearings in the complex vicissitudes of life. However, Zoshchenko soon moved away from this approach and acquired a widespread reputation as the author of short stories ostensibly based on a trivial, mundane event (such as a visit to the baths in "The Bath-House", 1924) in which all motivation of the

characters' behaviour is reduced to a minimum and the author's standpoint is expressed in the actions of the characters. Zoshchenko's writing reflects the negative phenomena in the life of the young state; if these were not understood and overcome, the cultural revolution and the education of high moral standards in the new society were inconceivable. Zoshchenko himself defined the central theme of his work as follows: "I write about the bourgeoisie. Of course, we don't have a bourgeoisie as a class, but for the most part I create a composite figure. In every one of us there is something of the bourgeois, and the private property owner and the money-grubber. I combine these typical and often blurred features in a single character and then this character becomes familiar to us; we have seen him somewhere before." The theme of educating the new man and overcoming the leftovers of bourgeois psychology becomes pivotal in Zoshchenko's work.

*HEARTS OF THREE**

Permit me to tell you about the undermentioned amusing incident.

A certain Leningrad engineer loved his wife very much. That is, generally speaking, he was indifferent to her, but when she abandoned him, he experienced a consuming passion for her. This often happens with men.

She, however, did not love him very much. Happening to be at one of the health resorts on the Black Sea coast that year, she had a very naughty affair with a certain artist.

Her husband accidentally heard about this and was most cross. When she returned home, instead of parting with her or effecting a reconciliation, he began tormenting her with jealous scenes and insulted her day after day with harsh and scathing observations about seaside resort acquaintanceships and so forth.

She had never had a job, but she nevertheless decided to leave him.

One fine day, when her husband had gone to work, not wanting explanations and scenes, she took a suitcase containing her wardrobe and went to stay temporarily with her girlfriend while she looked for a job and a room.

On the same day, she met her artist and told him what had happened.

But the maestro of the brush and chisel, on learning that she had left her husband, gave her an extremely cold reception, to say the least. He even had the impertinence to declare that there were certain feelings in the south, but feelings in the north are different, and everything at the seaside is five times more interesting than in a normal setting.

They did not quarrel, but parted in the highest degree coldly.

Meanwhile, the husband, learning that she had left home with a suitcase, became very distressed. Only now did he realize that he loved her with an all-consuming passion.

He rushed round to all her relatives and visited all the houses where, in his opinion, she might be residing, but he could not find her anywhere.

His wild despair gave way to depression; he even wanted to hang himself, avowing his intention in a private conversation with the lessor of his flat.

The chairman of the Rented Accommodation Co-operative Company, concerned about the fate of the occupier, hurriedly called on him to prevent him from the fatal step.

He spoke to the husband as follows:

"In the competition for the best model dwelling, our house is going to be first in the district. It would be most annoying for us if you, on your part, should be remiss in some way. If you have at least some kind of social conscience, then you will somehow manage without that."

Seeing that his civil appeal had not affected the engineer in any way, the chairman went on to say:

"You live in a cramped world of your own, and because of that your sufferings are very great. To re-educate you will call for a reserve of patience. If you wish, I shall take this on with you in future. In the meantime, however, I will give you a piece of good advice. Have an announcement printed in the paper something like (as they usually write in such cases) 'I love and remember you, come back, all is forgiven, I'm yours, you're mine', and so on. She will read this and will surely turn up, since no woman's heart is immune to the power of the press."

This advice found a lively response in the engineer's tormented soul and he readily did, among the lengths of fabric, and bicycles, place his announcement: "Marusya, come back, all is forgiven."

To this classic sentence he also added a few lines about his sufferings, but these lines were deleted in the office, since they were too maudlin and struck a false note in the general style of the announcements.

The engineer was charged thirty-five rubles. When he

paid the money, he noticed the date and was horrified to discover that his item would not appear for another fifteen days.

He lost his temper, declaring that he was not selling a bicycle and could not wait so long. Out of respect for his grief, they lopped off four days for him, scheduling the announcement for the first of August.

Meanwhile, on the next day, after the announcement had been handed in, his wife turned up at the Rented Accommodation Co-operative Company to sign off. He had the good fortune to see her there and sort things out with her.

This is what he said to her on the premises of the Housing Committee:

"I have been stubborn for seven years and have categorically refused to register your esteemed mother for our middle room, but if you come back now, then so be it, I shall register her."

She consented to return home, but wanted him to register her brother as well. He stood his ground and only agreed to place an area of living space at the disposal of her mother, who moved in, literally a few hours later.

For two or three days, things went very well for them. Then the wife was indiscreet enough to meet her portrait-painter.

On learning that she had returned to her husband, he evinced a rare tenderness and consideration for her. He told her that his feelings had blazed up again as in the south and that he would now be tormented and suffer because she was with her husband all the time instead of with him.

They spent the whole evening together and were very happy and contented.

The husband, worried about her being away so long, went to the gates to hasten events. And there, for the first time, he saw the maestro, who was walking arm-in-arm with his wife.

Their family scenes began all over again, but were even more trying and noisy than before, since her mother, for all her sixty-five years, took a most energetic part in them.

The young woman left her husband again and, influenced by the artist's passionate speeches, went back to him, ready to stay if he wanted.

But the portrait artist did not evince a passionate desire for this, saying that he was a fickle person, that things seemed one way one day and another way the next, and that love was one thing, but marriage was another, and that he would need at least a year to consider this step before arriving at a definite decision.

Then she quarrelled with the artist and stayed with a girlfriend, who soon fixed her up with a job in a psychiatric hospital.

Meanwhile her husband, after grieving for a few days, suddenly found consolation on meeting by chance the girlfriend of his childhood.

Even earlier, there had been signs of something, but now, finding himself alone, he felt a great affinity for her and suggested that she moved in with him.

She was pleased at this, because she had only recently arrived from Rostov and had not yet ordered matters in terms of accommodation.

In exactly eleven days, the fatal announcement appeared in the paper.

The husband, who had forgotten about it, did not notice the date. But his wife, languishing with her girlfriend, happened to see his appeal and was very shaken and delighted.

"All the same," she thought, "he loves me and me alone. I sense his ineffable suffering in every line. And I shall go back to him, since the artist is a big mouth and it's my own fault that I was so indiscreet over a seaside acquaintance."

We shall not unnerve the reader with further descriptions, we shall simply say that the appearance of the wife, newspaper in hand, was equivalent to a bomb explosion.

The husband, gibbering and running from one woman to the other, was unable to come up with anything like a satisfactory explanation.

His wife said contemptuously that had it not been for that announcement, she would not have set foot across the threshold of that petty-bourgeois dwelling. The girlfriend from Rostov burst into tears and said that she did not in the least want to piece together his broken heart with her presence and that if he had made such an extremely affecting announcement containing a public account

of his feelings, he should at least have waited for some kind of result.

In general, both women, embracing like good friends, left the engineer with no intention of going back to him.

On learning from the engineer that there had been another upheaval in the home, the chairman of the Rented Accommodation Co-operative said to him:

"Our house is good in every way. And it has come first. And the repairs were done on time. And there is complete unanimity among the residents on all basic questions. Only you are bringing discord and confusion into the peaceful tenor of our existence. Go home and do as you wish. As for re-educating you, one would have to go mad first."

Left in the flat with her mother, the engineer lapsed into wild despair and there is no knowing how it all might have ended if his girlfriend from Rostov had not come back to him that evening. She thus demonstrated that she was not as cruel-hearted as his wife.

True, on the next day his wife also wanted to return to him, but on learning from her mother that her husband's childhood friend had beaten her to it, she stayed with her girl companion.

She soon became absorbed in her work at the psychiatric hospital and recently married a psychiatrist there. She is now very content and happy.

The artist, on learning of her happiness, congratulated her warmly on her new life and, sighing tenderly, asked leave to visit her more often.

In general, after all these violent upheavals the hearts of the three were fully at peace.

It must be supposed that the fourth heart, the artist's, did not play any part whatever in our true story about the sad consequences of seaside romances.

As for newspaper announcements, the slowness of that procedure does not meet the demands of life at all. Things should happen at least six times more quickly.

VADIM KOZHEVNIKOV

(b. 1909)

Vadim Kozhevnikov, winner of the USSR State Prize, was born in Siberia into a family of exiled revolutionaries. His literary career, successfully begun in 1939, was interrupted by the war, which became the theme for many of the writer's later works including the collections of stories "March-April", "Beloved Comrades" and "The Roads of War". These were followed by the novels "To Meet the Dawn"

(1956-57), about revolutionary activity in Siberia; "Get Acquainted, Baluev" (1960), about the construction of a gas pipeline in Siberia; and "The Shield and the Sword" (1956), about Soviet intelligence officers.

Kozhevnikov's style combines intense lyricism with a touch of irony, wit and good-natured bantering at his characters.

*THE FORTY FACTORY SMOKE-STACKS OF MASTER CHIBIREV**

We drove along a gloomy, crooked mountain passage cut out of the rock.

Fine pebbles flew up from the tires, hitting against the car.

The heavy sky hung so low we could almost touch it: we were travelling along the rocky edge of a highway bordering an abyss.

Here the mountain range, densely covered with thick forests, had been abruptly cut. Stratified rock jutted out askew from the tumbled-down sides of the age-old cliff.

My companion, Engineer Chelyustev, sat next to the driver, with his arm uncomfortably resting on the seat back and his handsome, slightly mocking face politely turned toward me.

We had met earlier in the train. When Chelyustev had learned I was a journalist, he had expressed his delight and offered to give me a ride.

Leaning over the back of the seat, he chatted merrily.

"I will introduce you to one old-timer. He's well along in years but as sharp as a whip. He can tell you all kinds of things. He drinks, of course, but that doesn't interfere with his gift of gab. He knows many so-called true stories from Tsar Peter's time—you'll be enthralled."

Suddenly he clutched the driver's shoulder and ordered him to stop. When the car came to a halt he suggested we get out.

Down below, in a mountain hollow, the tiny buildings of the factory dotted the ground. The sparkling river, which resembled a shiny needle, was nestled in foliage. Little houses crowded along the river, and were as neat and tidy as those in a model.

I knew that nature had blessed the bottom of that depression with precious copper ore which was melted down in the factory's furnaces. I knew that the reserves of that ore were enough to cover a track from Moscow to the Far East. I also knew that five years before, there had been nothing more than diggings there—shallow holes full of stagnant water left by prospectors. Gold and copper are neighbours. Now, thanks to the determination of strong, courageous people, a new factory had sprung up on that mountain wasteland.

I was amazed at how tiny everything looked from where I stood.

"Look at that smoke-stack. See it?" I exclaimed. "It's shaped like a cigarette-holder and is no bigger than my little finger," I added, holding my finger in front of my eyes.

Chelyustev looked at me long and hard, and walked back to the car. He again sat down next to the driver but remained silent for the rest of the trip, staring out through the windscreen.

Within a few days I learned the history of the factory.

The project had been poorly planned.

Poisonous gases, which were given off when copper was melted, floated from the short, stubby smoke-stacks and hung over the town.

All the plantlife died after the first wisps of that insidious smoke, with its strong, bitter smell, appeared.

The factory was shut down. There were no air currents in the hollow, so there was no flow of fresh air which could dispel the poisonous gases.

People would have slowly suffocated in that stone hole.

Engineer Chelyustev suggested blowing up the cliffs near the pass and raising the level of the mountain river to wash away the banks of the gorge. Crevices in the stone wall would then get the air moving.

He set to work. By searchlights air-powered drills bore deep holes in the rock. These were then packed with dynamite and exploded. The town was evacuated.

In three months the work was complete. The long-awaited breezes rushed through the crevices into the hollow.

Once again the yellow smoke poured out of the short, stubby smoke-stacks. And once again it hung over the town in a deadly cloud.

The air current blew too high, and it was impossible to destroy the monolithic base of the mountains to form air tunnels.

Chelyustev almost lost his job. He was charged with "squandering funds", but was exonerated in court.

When he left the court-room after the trial, a short man with a dishevelled, red beard caught up with him. The man was dressed in new clothes which seemed to bother him. He constantly pulled at them, smoothing and straightening, and on several occasions took a small round mirror from his pocket to check his tie. What's more, the man limped. His appearance inspired neither trust nor sympathy.

He pulled at Chelyustev's sleeve and bringing his face with its blinking eyes close to Chelyustev's, spoke:

"Comrade, did you try releasing the gas higher?"

"What do you mean?" Chelyustev asked with hostility.

"By raising the smoke-stack higher. That's what I mean," the man grinned. Suddenly he became serious, straightened his coat, and, for some reason, held his arms rigidly at his sides. "I am Chibirev," he said with pride. "Perhaps you've heard of me? I have no permanent address. You can see from the newspapers that wherever a new factory is being built, I am there. Do you know how many smoke-stacks I have built? If you piled them one on top of the other and jumped off, it would take you two or three days to reach the ground. My brickwork is taught in schools. It is called Chibirev brickwork."

He took Chelyustev's arm and led him outside, continuing to speak rapidly with a regional accent:

"Another man has to be prodded and urged to action. The newspapers advertise and the unions beg, yet he still sits there on his ass and won't lift a finger. But you ask me: 'Chibirev, do you want to do the impossible for the people?' and I'll always answer, 'Yes, I do.' I get inspired. It's like someone lit a fire under me. Of course, at work I'm not like I am ordinarily. I'm imposing and pensive, as if I have a hundred years of experience."

When they passed the open door of a café, Chibirev

nudged Chelyustev's shoulder.

"Allow me to treat you to a glass of beer." Seeing that Chelyustev hesitated, he became angry. "What kind of comrade are you? I told you I am Chibirev, so that means I'm Chibirev." Then he added a little spitefully: "You should have been more cautious earlier, when you had blockheads working for you. It's time you learned to judge people correctly. That is as important as all your other sciences."

Chibirev and Chelyustev reached an agreement over a glass of beer. Chibirev stuck his papers back in his pocket and spoke gravely:

"Now have you understood what kind of man I am? Don't think that I agreed to come to your factory because I like you. As I sat at the trial I felt I couldn't stand it anymore. I was furious and was even afraid I might do something foolish. I had to contain myself."

"Forgive me, but I can't invite you to stay with me tonight," he said, in parting. "My mother does not allow it. I'd be only too glad if it were up to me."

Two days later Chibirev, loaded down with sacks and cardboard suitcases, lurched into the train compartment of the Far East Express where Chelyustev was already waiting.

He was accompanied by his mother.

She turned out to be a very headstrong old woman. She pulled out a wad of money from her purse and carefully picked several filthy, crumpled bills to pay the porter. Chibirev waited submissively in the corridor with their suitcases. The other passengers pushed and shoved him with their luggage, but he only frowned and sighed.

His mother made herself comfortable and counted her bundles, sternly watching as her son, perspiring and red from effort with his beard shaking, stuffed their belongings on the shelves.

Once everything was put away she again examined the bags, and then began to look Chelyustev over from head to foot without ceremony.

"So, you're the one who talked Chibirev into this," she said in a deep, calm voice.

Chelyustev succumbed to the powerful charm of the old woman in spite of himself, and made some indefinite

movement as if to defend himself, but she interrupted:

"Don't go getting all swelled up," she said. "Your part in this operation is small. Maybe you promised him a lot, but we aren't tempted by money. The Chibirevs can earn thousands anywhere. Money means nothing to us."

During the long trip Chelyustev learned about the Chibirevs' genealogy. They came from a family of famous master bricklayers.

Chibirev's father, Maxim, was known throughout Russia for the perfection of his brickwork in factory smoke-stacks. A fidgety, sickly, short man, he had sported side-whiskers, wore copper rings with artificial stones, and carried a walking-stick.

But his house in the village was falling to pieces.

The bricklayers' artel charged a great deal for constructing factory smoke-stacks, alluding to the difficult and dangerous work entailed. The most difficult and dangerous part was the upper portion of the stack itself. Usually two or three men finished it, though the money was equally divided among all the members of the artel.

For the contractors it was simpler and more profitable to hire individual specialists for the final work. But once they got a hold of a good master, they ruined him by impressing upon him how exceptional he was.

The contractors were not stingy with money or with words of praise for Maxim Chibirev. They booked individual rooms for him in cheap hotels, saying that it was embarrassing for a master of such quality to live with the other members of the artel in the barracks. They indulged his every whim and encouraged his eccentricities.

But few factories were being built in Russia at that time so Maxim was often out of work for long periods.

While living in poverty, Maxim disdained building stoves or working as a common bricklayer.

"I have to preserve my reputation," he said. "I can earn as much doing five stacks as another man makes in a year. My reputation is my sign-board."

When the contractors realized Maxim's weakness, they stopped paying him large sums of money for his work and offered ordinary wages. When Maxim complained, he was told:

"If you don't like it, leave. You're obviously not man enough for the job. We'll call in Govorov. He'll agree just for the honour. That's a real master! "

Maxim had never met Govorov nor had Govorov seen Maxim, but they were played against each other by the contractors and competed fiercely. They patiently bided their time waiting for the construction of tall smoke-stacks, and began working only when the foundation and part of the stack were already complete. Out of fear of each other, they agreed to work for a pittance, but asked the contractors not to tell anyone.

After a smoke-stack was finished and Maxim had received his paltry wage, he would go on a spree, pretending to be rich.

Then he would return to the village to wait for a new offer in order to continue his difficult and dangerous work, hear flattering things said about him, and risk his life for the hard-won glory of a fearless master.

Because he was ashamed of returning home empty-handed, as soon as he reached the edge of his village he would drink a whole pint of vodka right from the bottle, grimacing and coughing. But even after he was drunk he did not go home. He dropped in on the neighbours, lying, boasting and slapping his pockets as if he had a lot of money. He would flash his copper rings with glass stones and strike the table with his walking-stick, demanding refreshment.

While he missed his wife, Anna, a stately young woman with dark, proudly arched eyebrows and fair skin, he felt terrible when he thought of his humiliating encounter with her.

And when Anna borrowed a cart to bring her dirty, enfeebled husband home, he kicked at her in drunken despair and howled:

"Go away, you self-righteous old sow! You want money? Here, take it!" And he would turn out his empty pockets. "For a silver ruble fancy prostitutes kissed me and gave me pleasure," he sang out in a nasty voice.

Raising his heavy head, he peered drunkenly at Anna's face with his dull eyes and clenched his fist to hit her. But there was something in Anna's look that caused him to fall

back in the cart and sob hollowly, as a strong man overcome by misery sometimes does.

Where did Anna find the strength to preserve her love for that man?

Yet Maxim truly loved her. There was nothing purer or more sacred to him than Anna.

The proud, hard-working woman managed the house and farming all by herself. For a time, after a bout, Maxim zealously helped her, inspired by Anna's forgiveness...

One day Maxim learned that Govorov, upon finishing a smoke-stack for a sugar factory outside of Kiev, had carried a boiling samovar to the top and after drinking tea there, had thrown the samovar to the ground and lowered himself by a rope to the admiration of the crowd.

That cut Maxim to the quick and he hurried to Novorossiisk, where a huge cement factory smoke-stack was under construction. The contractor did not know him and only agreed to take Maxim on for daily wages.

When the smoke-stack was finished, Maxim remained on top alone. After drinking vodka, he sat on the edge of the stack, his legs dangling over the side, and began to play on an accordion.

A few passers-by stopped upon seeing the tiny figure of a man perched on the edge of the gigantic smoke-stack. The accordion could not be heard from such a height.

Apparently, Maxim misjudged his state of drunkenness. The accordion flew into the air, and Maxim followed.

His fellow-workers described all the details to Anna, and even sent her Maxim's laundered old clothes, realizing that to a widow, every penny counts.

Anna devoted her life to her son.

But when Stepan became a teenager and wanted to join an artel he was not accepted. The memory of his father, who had disregarded the age-old laws of the artel solidarity, was still fresh in people's minds.

Stepan decided to follow in his father's footsteps. But he could find none of the old masters who would agree to be his partner.

And then his mother told him that she would work with him.

Among bricklayers, stove-makers were considered masters of the highest quality.

The main thing in laying a flue and determining the location of the elbow joints and valves was proportion. Like in a trumpet.

Stove-makers were distinguished by the seams of their brickwork. A narrow, slightly protruding seam spoke of an exacting master.

Adversity had forced Anna to learn the craft of a stove-maker. On several occasions Maxim would agree to lay a stove, but had not managed to finish the job, walking off and leaving a pile of bricks and mountain of wet clay in the middle of the floor. The owner then would come to Anna to complain, accompanied by angry, shouting relatives.

Surrounded by an infuriated crowd, there was nothing Anna could do but finish the job herself.

Her work was characterized by the considerate tidiness of a woman.

Her stoves did not resemble the brick burial vaults which usually decorate village cemeteries.

As she grew more confident, Anna began to make decorative ledges. After whitewashing, she painted the stove with roosters and wrote sayings such as: *Husband, don't anger your wife or the soup will turn sour.*

In her stoves the flames did not lick the logs timidly, like a toothless puppy licks a bone but burned slowly and evenly. In her stoves the flames could be compared to sedate guest who eats his fill slowly and calmly, within reason.

Those were the kind of stoves Anna built.

Stepan hated the work of a village craftsmen. At that time he was a puny, fidgety, freckle-faced lad, assertive and full of life.

Taking advantage of his father's reputation as the best steeplejack and smoke-stack builder, Stepan sought out a contractor and agreed to lay a smoke-stack for a brewery.

His mother was to be his partner.

But no one had heard of a woman working as a bricklayer, and particularly one doing such difficult work as laying a smoke-stack.

When the Chibirevs arrived at the factory, they saw a crowd of workers bustling about in the yard. A man hung

on the smoke-stack near the very top clinging to the rungs for dear life. His frightened moan could barely be heard from that height.

The contractor, not wishing to bring shame upon himself for hiring a woman to work as a steeplejack, had called on Zhuzhelitsa, a stove-maker.

Zhuzhelitsa had sloping shoulders, arms that hung below his knees, and the reputation of a desperate man.

For fun, he would squat, pick up a brick, and break it on his bushy head. Then he would stand up straight and look around with his sunken, dark eyes twinkling. He listened proudly to praise, and let unbelievers feel his head—some people thought he had hidden a piece of metal in his hair.

Zhuzhelitsa took off his shoes, and spitting on his hands and showing off, pulled himself up on a rung. Sticking out his rear end absurdly, thus showing his total disregard of danger, he began to climb.

The contractor was very pleased.

“What a fearless devil! It’s a child’s play to him. Only a drunk can be so reckless! ”

But the higher Zhuzhelitsa climbed, the slower and more uncertain his movements became.

Finally he stopped and cautiously looked down. That was his undoing. The alluring, shimmering emptiness instantly destroyed all his bravado.

Weak with fear, he convulsively grasped the rungs, pressed against the smoke-stack, and froze. Then he began to howl mournfully.

An old bricklayer took pity on him and clambered up with a rope. When he reached Zhuzhelitsa, he tied the rope around the poor man’s body. But Zhuzhelitsa could not release his stiff fingers. Since the old man did not have the strength to force them open, he clambered over Zhuzhelitsa’s shoulders and holding on to the rungs, began to stamp on the frightened man’s grey, bloodless fingers.

Zhuzhelitsa screamed, his fingers came loose, and he swung in mid-air on the rope.

They let him down slowly.

He sat on the ground, pressing his hands under his arms, his bloodshot eyes open wide. There was a foolish grin on his face.

Smirking, the contractor walked up to Anna. He touched his bowler hat slightly with his walking-stick and spoke:

"We don't have any fine, handsome young men to hoist you up."

Anna turned her dark face with its prominent cheekbones to the contractor. The tall, thin woman looked him over from head to foot with frightened, shining eyes. Then she silently walked to the smoke-stack.

The contractor hurried after her, shouting frantically:

"I don't pay for mutilation or death! All of you are witnesses!" He turned to the workmen and asked with a plea in his voice: "Fellows, tell her I am hard-hearted and won't even pay for a burial mat."

Anna reached the smoke-stack, grabbed a rung and started up. She climbed with her eyes closed.

The workmen gathered around in silence. Zhuzhelitsa, puzzled and anxious, watched her, leaning back on his hands.

Suddenly he leaped up. Pushing the others away, he grabbed the end of the rope and started to climb, his legs slipping in his hurry.

"Don't be afraid, woman! I'm coming!" he shouted.

Anna stretched out a hand and did not find a rung. She felt around in the air, and then realized she had reached the top.

She crawled onto the scaffold and sat down, trying not to look below.

Stepan followed, with Zhuzhelitsa close behind, breathing heavily and perspiring.

"My God! It's so high!" Anna said.

"What did you expect?" Zhuzhelitsa exclaimed. "I almost busted my God damn ass not long ago." He suddenly grew embarrassed, realizing he had said something profane.

Being isolated at such a height gives rise to feelings of tenderness toward other human beings.

Anna breathed slowly and heavily, and began to look around, still afraid to let go of the scaffold.

There was a flock of birds in the distance, looking like a black seething cloud.

It came closer.

Then the air was filled with the rustle of wings. The dense mass of crows flew at the smoke-stack, blocking the sun and giving off a warm, gamy smell.

Anna screamed and covered her face with her hands.

Zhuzhelitsa leaped to his feet and began to wave his hat. Several heavy birds struck him. Then the flock abruptly turned, wings flapping.

"If not for me, they'd have shoved us off," he boasted, panting. "If they were smarter, they could have attacked us easily. Torn us to pieces like wolves in the forest."

Zhuzhelitsa became the Chibirevs partner and moved into the barracks with them.

When he got drunk, he did not show himself and slept it off somewhere outside.

On returning the next day, he spoke apologetically to Anna:

"My older brother is a caretaker and a sectarian. He doesn't drink. I was visiting him."

"What's it to me? Am I your wife?" she answered sullenly, with complete indifference.

Zhuzhelitsa would grow sad and make up to Stepan, no longer calling him sonny, but using the more respectful form of address: Stepan Maximovich.

One day, the barracks were empty. Anna was counting out Zhuzhelitsa's share of the money for their sixth smoke-stack together. It lay in a kerchief in her lap.

Zhuzhelitsa, all dressed up and beaming, looked at Anna's preoccupied face. There was a twinkle in his eyes and he grinned playfully.

"Here," Anna said, carefully tying the pile of money with a string. "Take it and go get drunk."

"I don't need it," Zhuzhelitsa said, and pushed aside the money.

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple, I don't need it. You take it and be the mistress," Zhuzhelitsa announced and resolutely pulling up the top of his new boots, raised his head and looked anxiously at Anna.

She did not stir. She only raised her hand to her throat and stroked her neck, as if something was bothering her.

"That won't happen until Stepan marries," she said

slowly, almost in a sing-song voice.

Suddenly she spoke rapidly, with great sadness:

"I wouldn't make you happy, Zakhar. If you touched me I would close my eyes and see Maxim. I'm tired of all that."

"That means you don't love me?" Zhuzhelitsa asked hoarsely.

"No."

"Would it be better for me to leave?"

"Yes."

The next day Zhuzhelitsa disappeared and was never seen again.

With time Anna's character changed. Her behaviour grew intentionally rough and crude. She now dressed in a man's quilted jacket and began to smoke coarse tobacco. She cut her hair in an unflattering way.

She was the one who made deals with the contractors, angrily bartering for every kopeck.

There were times, in moments of anguish, when she would say to her son:

Kulikov is a young whipper-snapper and a nasty one at that. He can't even unload bricks from the cart into neat piles, yet with me he is haughty and sarcastic. 'You're still a woman,' he says, 'and it's your violent temper that makes you go climbing on smoke-stacks. Give you a man and you'll quiet down right away.' I wanted to hit him on the head with my hammer."

Burying her head in her lap, Anna would cry. Her white, thin neck seemed weak and girlish.

But those moods would pass and Anna would go back to work.

When she finished laying bricks, she usually spoke scornfully to the other bricklayers.

"Hey, you good-for-nothings! Why didn't you do this woman's work? Any of you want to earn ten rubles? All you have to do is climb up to the top along the rungs. I want to watch."

Anna would pull out a ten-ruble note and wave it in front of the embarrassed bricklayers, but no one ever took up the dare.

The Chibirevs last worked in the Donbas area.

They demonstrated their method at courses for bricklayers, organized at the construction sites. Illiterate Anna, her face flushed with age, and her son explained their brickwork using small wooden blocks. Their method later became known as the Chibirev's method.

Mother and son travelled all over the country, and it appeared there was not a place they had not been. This was because factories were springing up everywhere.

The Chibirevs grew accustomed to their nomadic way of life.

Anna sat sprawled in the train compartment and ordered her son about. Her fat, flushed face remained dignified and immobile, and only her eyes, surrounded by wrinkles, twinkled slyly.

In her powerful, authoritative voice, she told Chelyustev how she once embroidered a design on canvas and liked it so much that later she and her son repeated the same design in the brickwork of a factory smoke-stack.

The members of the commission who came to open the new factory spent a long time walking around that stack, craning their necks. They doubted whether it was proper for a metallurgical plant to have such a frivolous smoke-stack. When they demanded to see the blueprints, the Chibirevs gave them Anna's embroidered canvas.

"And we'll exhibit our artistic talents at your factory too. We'll build a perfect minaret," Anna joked, and laughed heartily.

When Chibirev and Chelyustev went out to the corridor to smoke, they engaged in quiet, intense conversations about the future plan of work.

The following day, upon arriving at the factory, Chibirev ordered two carts of bricks to be brought to the yard near the bricklayers' barracks, and asked that the workmen be there at six in the morning.

He appeared at seven. The bricklayers, tired of waiting, rose to meet him and greeted him in unison. Many even took off their hats.

Chibirev's fame had preceded him. The men had heard only the best reports.

He nodded casually to the men, not looking at anyone,

and requested a table and chair for himself to be placed where it was cool.

The bare, trampled ground in the yard was baked by the sun and gave off a dry, dusty smell. The empty lot was as hot as a furnace.

Chibirev poured some wooden blocks from a tarpaulin bag onto the table, beckoned to the bricklayers and with the lightning movements of a magician, laid several rounds of bricks.

"Repeat," he said curtly, in a low voice, and nodded toward the mountain of bricks.

The bricklayers, surprised at his behaviour, obediently began to copy what he had done, using bricks.

Chibirev ordered tea and began to read a newspaper he pulled from his pocket, paying no attention to the bricklayers.

After a while, he walked over to the men, still holding his newspaper, and, glancing at the brick wells, knocked them over.

"Like a kindergarten class," he said in a bored, indifferent voice. "I tell them to lay a circular brickwork, and they build little houses." Then he returned to the table and buried himself in his newspaper.

But there was a hole poked in the paper through which Chibirev watched the bricklayers at work, though no one noticed.

He was capricious, continually found fault and was insulting. He tormented the workmen from morning till nightfall, ordering them to repeat one and the same brickwork hundreds of times.

On the eleventh day he called his team together in the yard. The men stood sullenly before him, waiting for some new insult.

Chibirev took off his hat, bowed to all, and smiled good-naturedly.

"I apologize to everyone I offended. You are the right men for this job. I purposely was cruel in order to test your characters and attitude to work. In general, I am a happy soul who likes comradeship. I don't consider it necessary to be too formal."

The following day Chibirev's team began laying the enormous smoke-stack.

Chibirev demonstrated the secret of the Chibirev's brickwork. Bricks literally flew from his hands into their proper places. Every man who watched him work felt that he could also lay bricks that simply. Chibirev made it look so easy. But only the most talented workmen were able to master the awkward, inflexible bricks and to give their movements the appearance of flying.

The circular keyboard of the brickwork obeyed Chibirev's hands, and the entire team followed the movement and rhythm of those keys.

Chibirev spoke, not taking his eyes off his hands:

"I have read all about the old masters. They added egg white to the mortar for durability. And the bricks themselves were larger, heavier and better fired. Hand-made bricks are immortal. Nowadays you often find bricks that seem to be made of porridge. You can tell them by their lightness. I don't like white brick. I love red. It is dark and hums. If a brick doesn't sing, throw it away. You can't depend on it. Have you fellows heard of the ancient Egyptians?" Chibirev asked, pushing a strand of hair from his forehead. "They lay their stone dry. Without cement. Those were real masters for you! "

At the end of each shift Chibirev tested the sides of the huge smoke-stack at the base with a plumb-line.

"A good one," he said lovingly, throwing back his head. "It pierces the clouds. Later they'll illuminate it with electric lights. Not for beauty, but to prevent some crazy pilot from ramming it with his plane. What a stack! " He stood on tiptoes and slapped the bricks amiably.

The stack grew and the higher it got, the smaller the area on top. Each day there was one less bricklayer at work.

The men had managed to overcome their urge to look down at the frightening emptiness. The view was extraordinary from the round scaffold on the very top of the smoke-stack. The workmen could see the clouds in profile. And when it rained long streams poured out of the heavy clouds which gave off a damp, cellar-like smell.

Conflicting feeling of ecstasy and one's own insignificance came upon a man when he sat towering above the old, jagged mountains resembling waves suddenly turned to stone in the midst of a storm.

But those feelings were cut short by Chibirev's shrill voice:

"Come on, come on. Faster!"

He calmly walked around the small scaffold on the stack's orifice, and reassured people with his confidence.

The smoke-stack reached the planned height. Chibirev decided to lay the final rows—the crown—the next day.

Anna and Chibirev came to work that shift.

She was dressed in quilted pants and her corpulent body was wrapped in numerous shawls as large as blankets. She shouted loudly at the men preparing to climb.

Chelyustev called Chibirev aside.

"Couldn't you talk your mother out of this?"

Chibirev looked him over from head to foot, and said in a high, nasty voice: "You ought to leave, comrade, otherwise you'll catch cold. And don't stick your nose where it doesn't concern you."

A cold wind raged in the scaffolding inside the shaft. The team climbed in the darkness: the Chibirevs, two bricklayers and a welder who was to fasten the lightning-rod. Their ascent took more than an hour.

Anna Chibirev went first. She seemed to stop up the smoke-stack with her huge torso. Her heavy breathing could be heard by all. She stopped frequently to loosen the knots of her oppressive shawls gripping the metal rungs with her feet.

When they emerged onto the round scaffold on top they staggered from the force of the wind.

That day the Chibirevs were particularly fault-finding and demanding with the two bricklayers.

"The top ring is the fanciest part," Anna shouted. "You are ruining it." She pushed the bricklayers aside and continued their work herself. The woman's fierce anger and impetuosity frightened the men and they tried to keep away from her.

She fearlessly bent over the abyss, levelling and improving the brickwork. Her head and shoulders hung over the frightening emptiness.

The wind blew fiercely. Powerful, noisy blasts raced above the hollow. They struck the stone column and then died, building up strength for the next attack.

Fluffy clouds smelling of dampness boiled and tumbled below, covering the earth.

The winch line clanked about, swinging widely like a pendulum.

There were only four rounds of bricks left to be laid. Anna leaned over and shouted in her son's ear:

"Chibirev, get rid of all of them, or I'll scare them off myself. This may be my last smoke-stack and I want to finish it myself. With my own hands."

Chibirev obediently crawled over to the bricklayers, who sat hovering in the shaft, resting.

"Congratulations!" Chibirev shouted, pulling his cap down over his eyes.

Holding on with his hands, he got up on his knees and looked at the welder who had tied himself to the scaffold with a rope and was welding the pole of the lightning-rod to the steel base, his welding iron giving off a piercing, fizzing flame.

"Like a crow on its perch. Afraid you'll blow off?" Chibirev asked derisively.

The welder turned to him, unbuttoned his coat, and hiding his head like a bird hides under its wings, he calmly tried to light a cigarette.

"You fellows ought to congratulate me, too," Chibirev shouted. "It's my fortieth smoke-stack!"

"How should we congratulate you?" a shivering bricklayer asked dejectedly.

"You could at least shake my hand."

The bricklayers reluctantly pulled their hands out of their warm pockets and shook Chibirev's outstretched palm.

"That's more like it. Politely," Chibirev said, and extended his hand to the welder, but the latter looked at him askance and said in a husky voice: "After a half-litre of vodka I'll congratulate you. You picked a fine time to throw a party."

Chibirev pursed his lips in offence and spoke just in order to say something:

"Well, let's go fellows. A little livelier!"

Anna had watched the entire scene. The large, corpulent woman crawled over to the men, looked at their faces slowly and carefully, and then, as if listening to something,

spoke in a sinister, hollow voice:

"Stepan, the smoke-stack is swaying. Do you feel it?"

The bricklayers froze and their faces suddenly paled and seemed to glow in the dark.

The smoke-stack really was swaying.

Its movement was so strong that one was immediately overcome with a sickening weakness.

Chibirev took one look at his mother and began to hurry the bricklayers down the scaffolding. They frantically descended in silence.

"What about you?" Chibirev shouted threateningly at the welder. "Don't you value your own skin?"

The welder looked over his shoulder and then slowly bent toward the spitting blue flame.

Anna leaned closer to the welder and shouted in his ear:

"The stack is swaying! Can't you feel it?"

The welder simply shrugged his shoulders and continued working.

"Obstinate," Anna said, and suddenly grinned. "They've left. Now we've plenty of room to work. Well, Stepan, let's get busy, and finish the top ourselves."

The Chibirevs bent over the edge and began to lay bricks. When the last round reached the welder Anna shouted:

"Move your legs, brave one! "

"Just a second, Mother," he said, and stepping back, connected the electric wires leading to the red light in the shape of a star attached to the end of the lightning-rod.

A warm, orange light poured down on the round, brick ring. The earth was not visible, shrouded in thick fog.

"Let's knock off work," Chibirev said approaching the welder.

"Yes, sir," he answered smiling.

"Why didn't you leave?" Anna asked. "After all, the smoke-stack is swaying. Aren't you afraid? You immortal or something?"

"What's there to be afraid of," the welder answered in a muffled voice, again trying to light a cigarette under his coat. "If the smoke-stack didn't sway that would mean your brickwork wasn't well proportioned. But if it sways as the earth turns, then everything is fine." Turning to Anna, he smiled gently. "And you, Mother, are real perky."

Frightened them off. Wanted to finish it yourself. I understand."

"And why not?" Anna asked. "Such a fine brick smoke-stack! It'll stand one hundred years, for people to gaze at and be amazed. How could I have no part in it?"

They gathered up their tools and were about to descend when the embarrassed faces of the bricklayers appeared in the shaft. They began to defend themselves, and complain about Anna in angry, uncertain voices.

"Let's go, fellows! Let's go!" Chibirev shouted merrily. "Don't hold things up and block up the flue."

Several days later yellow smoke snaked from the enormous, dry, stately smoke-stack. But this time the smoke did not fall into the valley. Raised to the level of the strong air currents, it blew far off into the mountains.

The Chibirevs received a telegram urgently requesting them to come to the construction of a new factory in Uzbekistan.

Chelyustev saw them off. At the station the old woman again shouted in an angry, authoritative voice, worried about their belongings, but in the fuss, even forgot to shake Chelyustev's hand.

Then Chelyustev saw them standing at the window spiritedly talking and looking not at him, but at the smoke-stack.

Chelyustev told me all this during the night shift in the foreman's glass booth.

The smelting furnaces, full of white fire, threw strips of piercing light on the worn metal slabs of the floor. Spidery cranes moved along a greasy, metal monorail. Greenish-orange liquid copper slowly cooled in forms and gave off a hot, acrid smell.

"Where are they now?" I asked Chelyustev after a long pause.

He looked at a cross-section of a greasy copper bar in the light and answered slowly:

"Anna Chibirev died not long ago. I don't know what of. Chibirev writes me occasionally. Here is his last letter if you are interested."

I read it through.

After the death of his mother Chibirev was completely alone. He went to a sulphur factory in Turkmenia located in a hot, dry, sparkling desert.

During the day the intense heat burned and tormented. At night, the desert was dark and cold.

On his arrival at the factory the tanned, emaciated Chibirev managed to find some vodka and got drunk. Then he walked out into the desert.

He was found and brought to the hospital in critical condition.

A month later he was released, but he was able to return to work only after two more months.

The seventy-five-meter smoke-stack was already complete. All he had to do was check its brickwork.

He did not climb up from the inside, since the scaffolding had been taken down. Instead, he ascended along the outside, in a cradle hung on a cable attached to a winch.

Once on the top Chibirev examined the work. For some reasons he decided to check the bricks under the winch, and began to move it. But he was weak from his long illness and could not hold the heavy metal. It came loose and fell to the ground, taking the cable with it.

Chibirev was left on the red-hot top, with the fierce sun blazing down on him.

It was impossible to get him down immediately since reconstructing the scaffold would take time. But man could not last very long under that deadly sun without shade.

Chibirev realized the hopelessness of his situation.

He sat down, wrapped his arms around his legs and did not move.

He was wearing a sweater of coarse wool that his mother had knit. He took it off to cover his head from the burning rays of the sun.

Perhaps touching the rough material prompted him to recall the resolute, turbulent strength of his mother, or something else caused him to come up with an idea, but he hurriedly pulled the sweater off and began to unravel it, winding the wool into a ball. Then he tied his pocket watch to one end and let it down slowly, carefully unwinding the ball of yarn.

The shiny watch attracted people's attention and realizing what Chibirev wanted, they undid the watch and tied a thin string to the end of the yarn. Chibirev carefully pulled up the string. One could say his life hung by that taut, shaking thread. If the yarn broke, his one chance was lost.

But conscientious loving hands had spun that yarn.

Chibirev grasped the end of the string. Bunching the yarn in a pile, he stuffed it in his shirt so the wind would not blow it away. Next he pulled up the string, which was attached to a rope, which was attached to a cable. He did not climb down until he had wound the yarn into a tight ball.

Once on the ground, Chibirev hugged that ball to his chest and avoiding the hands of the elated crowd, said gently with embarrassment:

"Mama knit it. It was her work."

Then he lowered his head and walked through the parting crowd.

From Turkmenia Chibirev went to Moscow where he was invited to work in a construction institute as an instructor.

Chelyustev gave me a ride to the station. Again we travelled along the mountain road hanging like a balcony over the valley.

On one side of the car slabs of the stone wall shot past, while on the other the heavy sky stretched out endlessly.

I asked the driver to stop the car where he had stopped previously.

The factory was clearly visible below. From that spot it looked just as tiny as it had a few days before and the tall smoke-stack still resembled a cigarette-holder. But this time I did not compare it with my little finger. I looked around at those old, shrivelled mountains. From an airship they would probably remind one of dry, stone wrinkles.

I gazed at the mountains, which time, wind and sun would erode to mere dust, and thought that nevertheless there was something on earth more durable and lofty than that decayed stone range.

"Listen, young man," Chelyustev shouted to me, leaning out of the car. "You can continue your daydreaming later! My fire bricks are being unloaded at the station and I can already hear them breaking. I have an imagination, too."

We continued along that road cut out of the rock for a long time.

Chelyustev lit matches to see his watch—he really was in a hurry.

"Oh, by the way, why didn't you go to see that old man I told you about?" Chelyustev suddenly asked in a loud voice.

"The one that is as sharp as a whip with the gift of gab?" I interrupted. "Next time."

As we reached the railroad track, the striped guard-rail lowered in front of the car.

We sat while a seemingly endless train passed, its wheels rumbling and clacking on the rails.

Chelyustev was nervous and kept lighting matches to see his watch. He was truly concerned about how his bricks were being unloaded.

BORIS GORBATOV

(1908-1954)

Boris Gorbatov grew up in the Donbas mining region of the Ukraine. During his short life he managed to travel all over the country: to Siberia, the Soviet Far East, the Urals Mountains, the Far North, and during the Second World War with the Soviet army from the Northern Caucasus to Berlin.

Gorbatov worked as a journalist for the newspaper "Pravda". He created a new form of the short story, closely resembling a documentary sketch. His book of stories entitled "Ordinary Arctic" (1937-1940) was his favourite, according to his contemporary and friend, Konstantin Simonov. It was prompted by a trip he took to Dixon Island in the Arctic expanse. Gorbatov was forced to spend an unplanned winter on the island after giving up the only seat on a plane leaving for the mainland to a comrade who had fallen ill. Hardships did not frighten him and he easily adapted to the life in the Arctic— helped in building a bath-house, went hunting and fishing, gave lectures to the polar explorers, and sent regular reports to "Pravda". When he finally left Dixon, he wrote in his diary: "My Arctic phase has come to an end. Where will fate send me now? Where will my wandering profession take me? What will I find on the next road? No matter that I find or where it takes me, I know that there will be something of interest to see, food for thought, and work to be done. Goodbye, Dixon. Hello, new road! "

But Gorbatov was to return to the Arctic. In 1936, he and pilot Vasily Molokov flew over the Northern Sea Route, spending two months in the plane and covering almost 30,000 km.

The heroes of Gorbatov's northern stories are ordinary people with everyday professions: a postman, a teacher, a doctor, a geologist, etc. They live their lives modestly and conscientiously under the extreme conditions of the North. The book "Ordinary Arctic" was written to counter the exotic heroes and "strong personalities" of Jack London's works.

"The old Arctic, terrifying and wild, with scurvy, lawlessness, winter camps with their tragedies and violence, senseless murders at night, insane loneliness, solitary death amid a white, silent expanse, the tyranny of the traders, and the cruel exploitation and degradation of the Chukchi people no longer exists. That old, frightening, trice damned Arctic has disappeared. I am all for the exotic, but I understand it differently than most. Are ice mountains and polar bears exotic? Everyone knows bears live in the North. But there are also tractors, milk cows, and pig farms, which many people are not aware of. I have always been interested in the daily life of the Arctic—its economic problems and the problems involved in developing the North."

But Gorbatov did not write only of the Arctic. His novel "The Donbas" (1951) describes socialist construction, and the short novel "Unbowed" (1943), which was awarded the USSR State Prize, tells about the Soviet people's struggle against fascism during the Second World War.

*CITIES WILL RISE HERE**

The wind force was ten. A storm raged. A large man stood with his legs spread apart. The wind beat at him, but he braced himself against it. Waves of snow blew about his boots and hooded fur coat, boiling like an angry sea. The man hunched over and covered his face with his icy scarf.

Everything was white, murky and illusive—neither day nor night, earth nor sky. The real world had disappeared, battered by the blizzard and covered with snow. There were no distinct outlines or shapes. Everything whirled and whipped about, caught up by the wind.

Only the man was real in his hooded coat and fur boots.

He alone stood immobile: everything around him was in motion. Stones, chinks of ice, clouds of snow, and mounds of earth sparsely covered with moss flew past him with a roar. A rabid ground wind tore up the snowy cover of the tundra and set millions of snow flakes in motion. Mountains, hills and cliffs were stripped bare. Everything was torn from its place and raced along, obeying the wind. The entire world, cloudy, blurred and biting, flew past the man with a whine.

It was difficult to stand in one place and resist the motion. One had to hide, like the birds and animals, or move. But the man in the hooded fur coat had nowhere to go and no place to hide. His vehicle was buried up to its motor in snow, and had frozen, while the torn tarpaulin on the truck body was not much protection from the wind. There was not a building, campfire, or smoke to be seen.

The man in the hooded coat craned his neck, as if trying to see something in front of him. An enormous burden bent

his back. It was the wind. It leaned on his shoulders, maliciously pushing him forward. The man braced himself. The wind was strong, but he was stronger.

Everything was caught up in a violent, headlong motion. It was not a snowstorm or a blizzard, but a race. A race of hurricane force. A continuous, deliberate rush forward.

The race had a direction: to the northwest, to the sea. Bare, copper-green stones were ripped off the mountain sides and rushed crashing and rolling to the northwest. Sharp ice-hummocks on the gulf fell with a roar, and chunks bounced, breaking and crumbling, to the northwest. The tundra, buffeted by the wind, seethed, and snowdrifts shifted. Clumps of snow whirled and a ground wind flew recklessly to the northwest. It seemed as if the entire tundra, driven on by the wind, was racing to the northwest, to the distant sea.

Only the man stood still, looking to the northwest, and did not take a step forward. His scarf no longer protected his face, having been torn away by the wind. For a brief instant it fluttered around his neck, but suddenly flapping wildly, it too flew off to the northwest. The blurred world raced past with a whine.

Then the man turned to face the wind. He moved slowly and deliberately, having to overcome very strong resistance — the solid wall of the storm. He turned in a circle, like a plane: first he moved his right shoulder and stretched out his right arm, then he made a half-turn, catching the wind in his chest. He withstood the impact and remained on his feet. Then he made another slight turn, and covered his face with his hands.

He was now looking directly into the wind. The furious, biting storm lashed him in the face, and he felt as if thousands of pine-needles were beating against his skin. Tears sprang to his eyes, rolled down his cheeks and froze. His face grew numb. With a convulsive effort he opened his mouth to take a deep breath and was afraid his cheeks would crack.

The wind was too strong: the man gasped for air, and felt his lungs would burst.

He began to shout:

"Hey! You! Fool! " His voice was lost in the howl of

the storm, but he continued to shout angrily at the wind. "You! Fool! I'm going! You hear? I'm going! "

It seemed easier to walk when he shouted. He even tried to sing, angrily, in a frenzy, but he did not have enough air. He could only shout one or two words or howl like a wolf.

Each step was a battle. It would have been easier to crawl, but the man stubbornly remained on his feet, picking himself up when he fell. He walked slowly, tearing at the thick curtain of wind with his hands. He gasped and wheezed, but kept going.

Finally, he could distinguish the hazy outline of something dark through the white haze. He had made it! He triumphantly shook his fist at the blizzard, lifted the tarpaulin, and crawled into the back of the truck. He was home.

He began to rub his frozen cheeks with snow.

"Is that you, Ignat?" a voice asked.

"Yes, it's me."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Did you check things out?"

"Yes."

"Well? Is it any calmer? Will we be able to leave soon?"

Ignat could sense the hope in the other's voice, but he answered ruthlessly and sarcastically:

"Sure, Kostik, it's calmed down. Go back to sleep. A force ten wind," he said, and laughed humourlessly.

Several hours passed. No one knew for certain how many, since none of them looked at his watch. Time no longer existed. There was only the wind, so they listened to it. There were moments when they thought the storm was weakening, and they lifted their heads and strained to listen.

"You hear it?" they asked one another. "Hear it?"

But a new gust of wind would snuff out their hopes, like a spark from a campfire in the steppe. They again fell back and huddled in their sleeping-bags. Ignat pretended to snore nonchalantly. Kostik sighed. The man in the third sleeping-bag coughed and moaned quietly. Fine snow continually

sprinkled down on them from above, melting on their faces, but they no longer noticed.

"That wind will never let up," Kostik muttered. "It will go on forever. What are we going to do?"

He was silent for a time, and then again began to grumble, not speaking to anyone in particular:

"What are we going to do, damn it."

"Wait," a sharp voice said from the third sleeping-bag.

Kostik started and fell silent.

They could hear the boards of the truck body groan in the quiet. Ignat crawled over to a black box against the side. It was a small radio receiver with a speaker. Ignat put on the headset and the other two raised their heads and listened expectantly. An ominous whistle burst from the receiver, as if the station were broadcasting the storm.

"Moscow, Moscow," Kostik sighed.

The radio whine merged with the howl of blizzard, and it seemed that the wind became angrier and more frenzied. Ignat tore off the headset and silently crawled back into his sleeping-bag.

"Wait?" Kostik muttered. "How long will we have to wait, Professor? Until our bodies are buried in the snow? When people go by sled, at least they can eat their dogs, but we..."

"Wait!" the professor repeated, and Kostik again fell silent.

He tossed and turned for a long time in his fur cage. He wanted to talk, to hear human voices. He listened to Ignat's noisy breathing and spoke:

"In Moscow I lived near Patriarchs' Ponds. You've seen them. White in the winter and green all summer. What is it that makes a man leave home?"

He waited, but no one joined in the conversation. The tarpaulin flapped noisily in the wind.

"As a boy I dreamed about boats," he whispered. "I wanted to be a sailor. Became a geologist instead. But never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd end up dying like a rat in a sack smelling of a dog." He again waited for a response, and not able to stand the silence, shouted: "Why don't you say something?"

He demonstrably turned over on his left side and

knocked his foot against a pile of minerals along the side of the truck. The stones rolled on the floor with a rumble, and there was the sound of glass breaking.

"Was that the bottle?" the professor cried out in alarm. "You broke..."

"No, no," Kostik answered hurriedly. "It was the lantern."

"Oh, all right then," the professor sighed, calming down.

"I keep the bottle with me, Professor. I couldn't take better care of it if it were a bar of gold."

"It's worth more than gold, Kostik. It's oil."

"Yes, I know, oil. Oil is life. If we survive, and finally make it back to Moscow—you're sure we'll make it, aren't you, Professor?—then we'll tell everyone how we found oil in the hills. How those drops trickled down the sandstone, and trembled in the collection bottle. And how they gave off the pleasant smell of oil. Oh, if only we survive! "

"Kostik," the professor interrupted him in annoyance. "Try not to be so poetic, please. It doesn't become a geologist."

"Yes, sir," Kostik whispered, offended.

It grew absolutely quiet in the truck. The only sound was an occasional wheeze or cough from the professor. He tried to suppress them, but only coughed harder as a result.

Many long hours passed.

The storm began to wane. Its gusts grew weaker, and not as fierce. The roar quieted to a contented murmur. The wind blew closer to the ground. Exhausted, it no longer flew, but crawled. The hazy shroud that covered the earth dispersed and everything returned to its prescribed place. The world was again real. White, snow-covered hills. White sky. White tundra.

A small, dark dot showed amidst that silent white desert. Now it was possible to see that it was a cross-country truck. The radiator was protected by a quilted cover sprinkled with snow, a snow-covered tarpaulin was stretched over the body, and the rubber tracks were buried deeply in the drifts. There was not a living soul around. Even the ruts made by the vehicle had long been covered up with snow, and it appeared as if the truck had come out of nowhere and was going nowhere.

But suddenly the tarpaulin moved, snow fell off it, and

a man in a hooded fur coat crawled out of the truck. He straightened his shoulders and stretched, his bones cracking. Then he threw off his coat. He was in a deerskin shirt, deerskin pants with the fur on the outside, a fur hat, and enormous driver's gloves which reached to his elbows. He had a dark, gypsy face, a wide, rapacious mouth, and large teeth.

He stood for a while, looking at the hills, tundra and sky with derision. "Well," he seemed to want to say, "have you finally calmed down?" A ground wind blew along the snow, like a silver stream, and the tracks it left resembled the rock bottom of a river.

"May is such a lovely month," the mechanic said mockingly. He spat on the ground and climbed into the cab.

He soon reappeared with a shovel. He thrust it into the snow and slowly walked around the truck, looking it over, brushing off the snow, and shaking his head. Then he picked up the shovel and began to dig it out of the snow. The vehicle was buried in deep drifts.

He worked smoothly, without pausing, shovelling in wide strokes. Mountains of snow slowly grew behind him.

Now he was the only thing moving: everything around him had frozen. The hills were cold and silent, the tundra was motionless, and the clouds in the sky hardly stirred. Everything had grown hushed and drowsy. The world was filled with that absolute unbelievable calm that occurs only after a storm. It seemed that the drifts, gullies, boulders and ice-hummocks—everything that the wind had blown about and uprooted—had been there forever and had always been as quiet and motionless as they were at that moment.

Only the man was moving. His arms, shoulders and back worked. The snowdrifts disappeared under his shovel, and snow dust flew about like foam.

Now one could believe that the truck would move, crushing ice ridges and throwing off hard clumps of snow as it went.

Ignat heard the crunch of footsteps behind him. He knew without looking that it was Kostik.

Kostik walked a little unsteadily. He was a pale, thin young man with sparse, light-brown hair. He was wearing

dark glasses. His face had grown pinched, his cheeks sunken, and two new, deep wrinkles had appeared at the corners of his mouth.

He walked slowly, like a sick man, leaning heavily on his shovel. He bent over, picked up a handful of snow, ate it hungrily and coughed. He coughed long and painfully, but as soon as the attack passed, he ate more snow. Then he walked up to Ignat and looked at him merrily, squinting from the bright reflecting from the snow.

"So, we'll be on our way soon, right, Ignat?"

"How's the Old Man?" Ignat asked tonelessly.

Kostik's face darkened.

"Bad," he said quietly. He paused and then added frowning: "Very bad."

"What did he say?"

"You know him," Kostik said, shrugging his shoulders. "He won't say anything."

Ignat listened with his head bent. The snow around them suddenly began to shine dimly—the sun had broken through the clouds.

"You're right, he never complains," Ignat said after a pause.

The two men stood silently looking at the ground for a long time. Suddenly Kostik raised his shovel angrily and began to work. His movements were nervous and jerky. He breathed heavily.

Ignat crawled into the truck and hauled out two small cans of gasoline. He carried them carefully, clutching them to his chest.

But before he began to refuel the truck, he held up his hand to see which way the tired wind was blowing. He turned his back to the wind and began to fill the tank. He poured carefully, afraid to spill a drop. Just as a starving man cuts bread on his palm so as not to lose a crumb.

The can was empty, but the mechanic still shook it a few more times. The last drops plopped into the tank. The can was empty and there was nothing more he could do. He sighed and picked up the second.

Kostik walked over with his shovel on one shoulder. He stuck it in the snow and watched Ignat.

"Is that the last one?" he asked timidly.

Ignat did not answer. They could hear the gasoline gurgling in the tank.

"Ignat, I wanted to tell you," Kostik continued cautiously. "You see... we are about as rich as three men can be. We still have a can of condensed milk left. The last one."

"Give it to the Old Man," the mechanic said abruptly.

"And half a bar of chocolate."

"The Old Man."

"And one box of biscuits. That's it," Kostik said, making a helpless gesture with his hands. "There is nothing else left."

"You take the biscuits."

"What about you?"

"Me?" Ignat listened to the gurgle of the gasoline in the tank and his face brightened slightly.

"The Old Man is in bad shape," Kostik continued. "Real bad." All his anguish, desperation and fear could be heard in that last phrase.

Ignat frowned.

"He doesn't complain. He keeps saying we should wait. And he even jokes and laughs," Kostik said. "But I see through him. You hear how he moans when he thinks we're asleep."

Ignat raised the can, placed it on the hold, and listened, frowning.

"He's never been this bad before," Kostik whispered. "I know, I've known him for a long time. I took his course at the university. He always had a bad heart, but now—the trip, the storm, the hunger..."

"We'll soon be on our way," Ignat said. "I think we're headed in the right direction now."

"You see, Ignat," Kostik walked closer to the mechanic and put his hand on the can. "You see, he is very weak. I'm afraid he won't make it back. The heart is like a... a... You wouldn't know, you've probably never been sick."

"Like a booster."

"Yes. I'm no doctor, of course, but I think the Old Man is terribly weak. I'm still holding out since I'm young. You? You're strong as a bull. But he... Ignat, he needs something hot. Hot milk, for instance. What do you think?"

Ignat's face darkened and he picked up the can.

"He needs hot milk," Kostik whispered with conviction. "Don't you understand? It would warm him up. Then we'd bring him back to the base alive." He looked at his comrade's swarthy face blinking, trying to see his eyes, but was met with a cold, leaden stare. He hung his head.

"I won't give it to you," Ignat said, and turned away.

"But don't you understand? The Old Man is dying!" Kostik shouted, but casting a frightened glance at the back of the truck, restrained himself, realizing he might have been heard.

"I won't let you have it."

There was a lengthy silence. Ignat stood with his teeth clenched. His face was unpleasant—his strong jaw jutted forward and his eyes shone coldly. Kostik cried quietly.

Ignat's jaw trembled slightly.

"Do you think I love the Old Man less than you do?" he said softly.

He looked at the can, and then, as if having reached a decision, slapped Kostik on the shoulder.

"Let's go."

"What?" Kostik started.

"Let's go see the Old Man. If he says yes, I'll give you the gasoline."

"No!" Kostik exclaimed in fright.

Ignat shrugged his shoulders as if to say: it's up to you, and was silent for a while. Then he spoke:

"Even if the Old Man had said yes I wouldn't have turned it over because..." he faltered and lowered his head, "because I don't only love the Old Man, but my truck and I are responsible for his safety."

"But just a half-litre. A half-litre of that damn gasoline in the primus and..."

"A half-litre is one-and-a-half kilometres."

"And you're refusing the Old Man for a lousy kilometre and a half?"

Ignat picked up the can and shook it. The liquid sloshed inside.

"You hear that?" he asked. "This is the last can. It is more precious to me than my own blood. If you asked me to give the Old Man blood, I'd give him a litre, or a whole bucket without blinking an eye. But I won't give you the

gasoline. I won't! Do you understand?" He shouted threateningly, but then he got hold of himself, put the can on the tank and continued quietly, in a different tone: "I have figured and refigured, Kostik. We don't have enough gasoline to reach the base. I don't know how far we'll get, but I do know that the less we cover the more we'll have to go on foot."

"Are things really that bad?" Kostik mumbled.

"I conserved as best I could," Ignat said, shrugging his shoulders. "I worried over each drop."

He walked to the motor, put his hands on the can, and looked questioningly at Kostik.

"Well?" he said hollowly.

Kostik waved his hand hopelessly.

He listened as the last drops fell into the tank.

"I'll split the biscuits three ways," he muttered.

"Ignat! Kostik! " a voice called from the truck. "What are you doing?"

"The Old Man! " Kostik whispered hurriedly, and the two men ran to the back of the truck.

The Old Man stood in the back of the truck looking at his watch with a reproachful expression on his face. He was tall and thin, and not yet old, being about fifty. He had clear, childlike eyes, but there were dark circles beneath them. His face was leathery and tan (the wind-blown face of a geologist), but it was swollen, showing signs of oedema. He was ill, and probably realized it himself.

"Sixteen-fifty local time. That's twelve-fifty in Moscow," he said shaking his head. "You're fine expedition members. If I hadn't called you, we'd have missed the broadcast."

Ignat hurriedly put the empty can down and scrambled into the truck. He threw back the tarpaulin and folded down the side. Sleeping-bags lay on the floor. Empty cans, instruments, tents and boxes were neatly arranged in the corner. There were also bags of rocks, obviously samples. In another corner, closest to the cab, was the radio receiver. Ignat went over to it. Sprawling on the floor, he put on the headset.

Kostik pulled the sleeping-bags closer to the receiver and they all sat down. The Old Man crossed his legs Indian style, and anxiously looked at the speaker. It was covered

with silver hoarfrost. Everything was so quiet that they could hear the Old Man's watch ticking.

The men did not speak. An unbearable silence reigned. The tundra was frozen, and the distant cry of a polar owl died after not receiving an answer. The Old Man looked sadly at his watch: 17:10. He signed.

"We missed it," he said, and looked at the others.

There they were, in a desolate truck lost in the snow. The rest of the world had forgotten them. It was silent, which was worse than hunger.

Ignat impatiently fiddled with the set, changing the channels. He would have been happy to pick up any station, even a strange one. Suddenly the gay voice of an announcer boomed out of the speaker. The three men froze and listened.

"And now we will hear the record, 'Under the Rooftops of Paris'..."

The enticing sounds of a waltz fell on the tundra like a warm rain.

"Paris, oh Paris!" the hills echoed, and Ignat began to whistle.

Kostik sat huddled over with his hands covering his face. His shoulders shook gently. At first it appeared that he was swaying to the rhythm of the waltz, but his shoulders trembled faster and faster and his teeth chattered. He squeezed his head in his hands and suddenly cried out in an unnaturally high, shrill voice:

"I can't stand it anymore!" He fell back and his head began to beat against the floor.

The Old Man hurried over to him.

"Kostik! What is the matter? Get a hold of yourself."

Kostik's cries mingled with the sound of the waltz and both echoed in the hills.

The professor carefully raised the young man's head, lay it on his lap, and stroked his hair with his warm hand.

"Calm down, Kostik. Calm down. That's no good."

"I can't... I can't stand it... That music when we are dying... That music!"

"Turn off the radio, Ignat!" the Old Man commanded. "The hell with Paris!"

But Ignat did not touch the dial. He turned sharply to

Kostik with a grimace of disgust on his face. His sharp jaw jutting out further than usual, and his fists clenched as if he were about to strike the sobbing young man. He bent down over him.

"Stop!" he ordered. His voice was toneless. "Stop this craziness. Do you hear me? Stop! We'll make it. I'm telling you we'll get there."

Kostik quieted down in fright. He repressed his sobs and only his shoulders shook as if he were shivering.

"Lift up your head," Ignat demanded. "Aren't you ashamed?"

"My glasses," Kostik whispered timidly. "Just a moment, while I find my glasses." Sniffing, he crawled along the floor searching for his glasses. He purposely spent a long time looking for them. At last he raised his head, but avoided looking at the other two, huddling up as if he were cold.

Ignat turned away and looked in the direction they were to go. "Paris, oh Paris," he sang, but his voice was angry. He stood with his legs apart and hands in his pockets. The tundra rippled in the sun as far as he could see. There was no sign of road, so it was pointless to search for one.

"I'm ashamed of myself," Kostik whispered. "Forgive me, please."

The Old Man put his arm on his shoulder and the two of them listened to the music. Now the theme was hot Argentina. Ignat kept time with his foot.

Then the radio went dead. It was quiet in the truck. They could hear the sounds of the reawakened tundra—the birds and animals. It even seemed that the snow, touched by the sun, was responding. The Old Man stood near the speaker, lost in thought.

A white ring-tail flew low over the vehicle, arrayed in its early spring covering of black spots on white wings, and cried shrilly.

The Old Man suddenly shook himself out of his reverie.

"Let's go, men!" he said, clapping his gloves energetically. "To horse!"

Ignat went to the cab, got a tray, filled it with used oil, and lit it to warm the motor.

Suddenly the engine began to throb, quietly and hesi-

tantly at first, dying and then flaring up again, but gradually the sound of it growing stronger.

"You hear that?" the Old Man shouted to Kostik, his eyes sparkling. "You hear it?"

It wasn't clear what he meant. The motor ran quietly and desolately, and only the echo repeated the sound and magnified it. But, perhaps it was the echo the Old Man was listening to. Perhaps he seemed to hear trucks, and boring drills, and engines, and oil spurting up in great fountains.

Kostik also listened to the motor humming. It was now running evenly (its assured voice resembling Ignat's), and Kostik calmed down.

"We will get home! We will," he whispered. "To our friends. Now we'll get under way," he said to the Old Man.

The truck slowly set out. The snow began to sing under its tracks: besides the hum of the motor, there was no sweeter music to the travellers.

The endless sky stretched out before the men. On that clear, sunny day it served as compass and map. Far to the northwest it was dark grey—the sea was there. To the south it was light brown—that was the tundra. To the east it was blue—the ice-covered gulf. The sky was acting as a mirror, reflecting the land below. Kostik looked at it and thought he could see a road. It lay to the east and led to the blue gulf. It was straight and open, and sparkled in the sun.

Suddenly the truck lurched and the metal cable broke with a clang. In the back of the truck everything tumbled to the floor and was thrown from side to side. The Old Man and Kostik climbed out.

"What happened?" Kostik shouted in alarm.

Ignat silently pointed ahead. There, as far as the eye could see, the earth was covered with jagged peaks. Those were hummocks, wild conglomerations of hills of ice.

"What are we going to do?" Kostik asked in despair. He stared sadly ahead. There, beyond the ice of the gulf lay the base—so close, but out of reach.

The Old Man also looked in that direction. He was silent for a while and then gave Ignat a sign with his arm.

"Straight ahead!"

"Yes, sir," Ignat answered calmly.

Taking a shovel he began digging away the snow in which

the truck was stuck. The other two quickly set in to help.

Now the Old Man and Kostik walked along next to the vehicle. It would sink in soft, dry snow or suddenly rear up, like a horse, and crawl over a hummock of ice. It seemed to be fused with its unruffled driver. At times it appeared as if Ignat forced the truck forward with sheer will-power, raising it in his hands and carrying it over the ridges. But more and more frequently the vehicle got stuck in the snow. Ignat would vainly urge it forward, but the tracks would dig in deeper and the truck would not respond.

Then the Old Man and Kostik would march forward with their shovels. They attacked the hummocks, digging away at the snow and freeing the tracks in order to repeat the same process after another five metres. The truck crawled forward slowly, each metre costing the tired, hungry men inhuman effort.

The day passed in this manner.

The exhausted explorers lay near the truck. It had become firmly entrenched among the ice hummocks. The motor was off. Silence lay over the tundra.

Kostik greedily ate snow.

"Did we get very far today?"

"About three hundred metres."

"So little."

Silence.

"How far is it to the base?"

Silence.

"Quite a way."

Suddenly the Old Man stood up and walked over to the truck. He grabbed a shovel and began to throw off the snow furiously. The others followed his example. Pale Kostik staggered over to the truck. Ignat, tired, stood up, his eyes puffy.

They worked in silence, gloomy and frantic. Blood appeared on Kostik's bitten lip. He licked it and continued working. No one could say that he had lost his nerve.

When he paused for a moment, he looked ahead hopefully: perhaps he would see the end of that damned ice field. But the hummocks went on forever, as if the entire world consisted of those jutting chunks of ice. After gazing on that hopeless scene, it was even harder to get back to work again.

"Never mind," the Old Man said, seeming to have guessed Kostik's thoughts. "Don't worry, my young friend. Chel-yuskin had it worse. And Albanov really suffered. The main virtues of a polar explorer are patience and the ability to work hard."

He wanted to say something else, perhaps something humorous and cheerful (his eyes sparkled mischievously), but suddenly grimaced and sank to his knees with a moan. Ignat and Kostik rushed over to him. His face had frozen in an expression of excruciating pain, so strong he could not hide it.

"Not well," he managed to get out. "My shirt..." he tore at his collar. "Can't breathe."

Ignat bent over and cut the fastenings of his hide shirt.

"Don't worry," the Old Man muttered. "It has happened before. It'll pass. I'm better already."

Kostik and Ignat carefully carried him to a sleeping-bag. Ignat put his head on the Old Man's chest and listened to his heart. It gurgled like the gasoline in the tank.

Ignat stood up abruptly and ran to the truck; rummaging impatiently through the pile of instruments, he at last found an axe.

He wiped the blade on his sleeve, looked at it for a long time, and suddenly began to chop angrily at the wooden side of the truck.

The hollow ring of the axe carried over the tundra.

"What is he doing?" the Old Man exclaimed. "He's gone mad! Ignat! "

"It's all right," Kostik whispered. "Relax. He knows what he's doing."

With wide-open eyes the young man watched as the mechanic hacked away at the truck. There was method in his madness: he chopped the upper boards and left the lower intact. He swung hurriedly, as if afraid to stop, afraid he might regret what he had begun. Kostik watched him through inflamed, tired eyes, and thought that he would never forget that scene: the mechanic destroying his truck.

Ignat carried a pile of chips over to them and threw them on the snow.

"Light them," he said to Kostik, and turned away.

Soon a smoky fire burned in the midst of the ice ridges.

Snow was melting in the tea kettle, and it seemed cosier in the icy desert.

The three men sat around the fire.

"In Sochi the magnolias are in bloom," Kostik said whistfully. "And there are lilacs in Moscow. All we have here is snow..."

"It's a myth, a legend," the Old Man cut him off. "Where are magnolias blooming? Ignat, can you believe there are magnolias somewhere?"

Ignat laughed.

"Yet there are," the Old Man said, smiling. He looked at the snow and shook his head. "There'll never be magnolia blossoms here. But there don't have to be, right fellows? What do we need magnolias for?"

"We don't," Ignat laughed. "But it wouldn't be a bad idea to plant a few tobacco plants." He shook the last bits of tobacco out of his pocket into his hand.

"Shall we share it, Professor?"

"You smoke."

Ignat lit a cigarette.

In the silence they could hear the water begin to boil.

"Magnolias?" the professor snorted. "As little as twenty years ago one scientist, Dovner-Zapolsky was his name, wrote in a respected magazine that the area north of Russia is, by nature, suited for polar hunters and fishermen, and civilized men could live here only if forced. What do you think of that? You know what we'll do, Ignat? To punish that scientist, we'll engrave his statement on marble pedestals in the cities that will rise here in the tundra along the Arctic Ocean."

The professor looked at the lifeless gulf, the white hills, and the copper-red rocks which the wind had cleared of snow.

"A huge foundry," he said thoughtfully. "For millions of years enormous work has gone on in the earth's bowels. We'll find its products. We already found oil and mesozoic coal. And we'll find upper-paleozoic coal too, like they found in Norilsk. That, my friends, is real high-calorie coal. Steamships will run on our coal. The Kamchatka will get inexpensive salt which will be obtained here. Factories, industry, cities and even theatres will be built."

"Construction workers will come after us," Kostik said, excited. "They'll arrive on large, powerful vehicles that can ride any force-ten wind."

"Wind!" Ignat laughed. "We'll force the wind to run our engines. Harness its tremendous power!"

The milk began to boil in the pan. Ignat carefully filled an aluminium mug and handed it to the professor.

"What about you?" The Old Man asked suspiciously.

"We'll have some too."

Ignat got two mugs, and turning his back to the professor, filled them with hot water from the kettle, adding a few drops of milk.

"Here," he said, handing Kostik a steaming metal mug.

The Old Man warmed his hands on the hot metal, and breathed in the savoury smell of milk.

"Let's drink to life which will arise here, and for whose sake we... we were prepared to sacrifice everything."

The men slept buried in their sleeping-bags beside the low-burning fire. Kostik dreamt he was in his Moscow apartment near Patriarchs' Ponds entertaining his friends. The table was laden with strange food: there were pyramids of sugar, resembling ice-hummocks, milk in gasoline cans, and canned goods.

Ignat was the only one awake. He quietly crawled out of his sleeping-bag, listened to Kostik's deep breathing and the Old Man's wheezing, and walked off. Soon he disappeared among the hummocks.

The party on Patriarchs' Ponds was getting livelier. Kostik's friends surrounded him and happily shook his hand...

He awoke. Ignat was standing over him.

"It's time," he said, and went to wake the professor.

Again, a huge sun hung in the sky. It was impossible to say what time it was. It could have been two o'clock in the afternoon or two in the morning.

"Professor!" Ignat said. "It's time."

"Yes, yes," the Old Man said, shaking himself. "Let's hit the road."

"Professor, I'd like to report. I checked out the road ahead—it is completely covered with ice-hummocks. We can't get through."

The Old Man listened gloomily, and deep wrinkles ap-

peared around his mouth.

"Well?" he said.

"There's more. We are running out of fuel."

The Old Man calmly walked over to the truck. Ignat and Kostik followed.

"I await your order, Professor."

"I already gave it. Let's hit the road."

Again the crunch and cracking of ice breaking, the hum of the motor and the clang of shovels: the music of the road.

"How much did we cover?" Kostik whispered toward the end of the day.

"Five hundred metres."

"Not very much."

When they stopped to rest, Kostik divided up the last biscuits.

"That's it," he said.

"Let's continue on. We have no provisions and we're almost out of fuel," the professor said, summing things up. "What else can we do but go forward."

The professor's "forward" hung over Kostik constantly. He heard it when he straightened up after shovelling, or when he rushed to dug snow from under the tracks. And his own, dry, cracked lips whispered: "Forward! Forward! "

Ignat forgot to put on his dark glasses and by the time he remembered it, his eyes were almost blind from the bright reflection of the snow. He could not see the road ahead very well, but stubbornly continued to drive his truck at the hummocks.

"I'm going blind, Professor," he muttered.

Suddenly, the truck jerked to a halt. The jolt threw Kostik out of the back. He leaped to his feet and automatically grabbed his shovel.

"Another hummock?"

Ignat pulled off his gloves and tore off his glasses. He tried to remain calm, but for the first time during the entire journey, his movements were nervous.

"Professor, we are out of fuel."

Kostik collapsed in the snow and stared at Ignat in horror.

Ignat's face grew pinched and old. He looked at the truck helplessly as if saying a last farewell. The Old Man

glanced ahead, and then at the hills. When he spoke, he tried to be funny:

"We discovered thousands of tons of oil in those hills and you're complaining that there's no fuel."

They resembled people from a shipwreck. They sat silently next to the stranded truck. Kostik constantly wiped his glasses. Ignat finally broke the silence:

"We're awaiting your orders, Professor."

"Yes, yes," the Old Man said, and glanced at Kostik, who felt his look and blushed.

"Well, then, let's go," the Professor said.

He looked sadly at the rocks scattered over the truck bed—the fruits of inhuman labour in the hills.

"Before we set out we must leave a note stating where we found the oil," he said calmly. "Just in case," he added, looking at Kostik.

"Professor Starov's exploratory party, which left on... along the following route... with the assignment to..." He wrote in detail. *"We have done all we could,"* he concluded. *"We sincerely hope future expeditions will succeed in doing more."* He signed the report and handed it to the others for their signatures.

Then he looked at his watch.

"Twelve-fifty Moscow time," he said. "You have ten minutes to get ready."

Kostik laughed sadly: there was nothing to get ready.

"At 13:00 we can hear *The Arctic Gazette* one last time," Ignat suggested quietly.

The radio. The last thread connecting them with the outside world.

"All right," the professor said. "We'll listen to the radio."

They sat around the black speaker and waited silently. Ignat fiddled with the receiver. The Old Man glanced at his watch. Kostik thought that it would probably be the last time he would hear an unfamiliar voice.

Suddenly a mighty wave of sound poured from the speaker. The majestic well-known melody grew louder and echoed over the hushed, white desert. The men stood up and took off their hats. They were looking to the southwest. Kostik and Ignat suddenly noticed that the Old Man's hair had turned completely grey.

The last sounds of the national anthem died away, but the men continued to stand. They were brought around by the announcer's voice:

"Attention! Attention! This is Polar Radio Centre at latitude seventy-two degrees north. Greeting to all polar explorers! "

The announcer's gentle voice filled the air and it suddenly felt warmer and cosier in the truck. The men huddled around the radio like around a campfire in order to warm themselves near the human voice.

They listened to the news and were surprised. Ministers were in session, soccer teams competed, vacationers were heading to the south. The world was turning as usual, and strangely enough, the concerns of the outside world affected the doomed men. They listened avidly, getting upset over bad news and laughing at good. They could almost smell the forgotten aroma of the mainland.

"Attention! Attention! Calling Professor Starov's geological exploratory party."

They raised their head in surprise.

"Can you hear us, Professor Starov? Can you hear us?"

"Yes! Yes! " the Old Man answered in surprise.

"They're calling us. That's for us! " Kostik shouted. He leaped to his feet and paced back and forth, not knowing what to do with himself. Finally he sat down by the speaker.

"They're calling us. Did you hear, Ignat?" he cried shaking him.

"Yes, be quiet," Ignat whispered, and put his arm around Kostik's shoulder.

The three of them froze, held their breaths and waited.

"Comrade Starov! This is the third time we are broadcasting this message in case you did not hear earlier. There is a radiogram from those at your base. They are worried about your long absence and have decided to begin a search. Three dog sleds have been sent. Two are moving in the direction of the hills along your route, and the third along the river valley in case you got off the course. I repeat..."

"Not there! Not there! " Kostik shouted in desperation. "Search for us in the Gulf of the Cross. We're here! "

"What a pity they can't hear us, Kostik," the professor said, smiling bitterly.

"We are all concerned about you," the announcer continued. "We wish you good health and high spirits. Do you hear us? All of us here wish you good health and high spirits."

The Old Man stood up and stared southwest, at the copper-red hills stretching in a jagged ridge along the gulf. They sparkled in the sun like liquid metal.

"They are looking for us there," the Old Man said, pointing. "In the valley beyond those hills."

Ignat walked over to him. Squinting his half-blind eyes, he stared at the hills and said quietly:

"We'll cross those hills. Right, Professor?"

"You think so?" the Old Man said, turning abruptly.

Kostik listened to their conversation.

"Let's sit down," the professor said, and lowered himself onto a sleeping-bag. He put his head in his hands and was silent.

Kostik and Ignat watched him tensely.

"We now have plenty to choose from," he said finally. "We can pick one of several ways of rescue. We are being searched for and that search will continue until they find us or our bodies. I am speaking bluntly because I want you to be fully aware of our situation and make a decision."

"We understand, Professor."

"We can continue along our previous route, as we decided a half-hour ago. Will we make it? Perhaps. It's a chance. Think about it. We can remain here and wait until they find us. I don't know if we can hold out, but it's another chance. Finally, we can..."

"Cross the hills to meet the search parties," Ignat interrupted.

"Yes. Cross the hills. There is the risk that we won't succeed, and will die of exposure and cold. But it is also a chance to survive. Perhaps the best. But it is also the riskiest. What is your decision?"

"To cross the hills," Ignat said.

"Cross the hills," Kostik echoed.

The Old Man once again glanced at the hills, and then at Kostik. He stood up.

"Let's go!" he ordered harshly, and then turned and clutched his heart so the others would not see.

Ignat was the last to leave. He kept turning around to say goodbye to his truck. Finally he waved his arm in despair and caught up with the others. They stumbled along the ice hummocks, falling in the snow, helping each other and continuing on.

Suddenly Kostik cried out in horror:

"Professor! I forgot the bottle of oil!"

"What?"

"I forgot," Kostik whispered dejectedly.

He looked back. The truck was still visible amid the ice hummocks, but what a torturous path to get to it! Suddenly, Kostik started back having made up his mind.

"Kostik, don't!" the professor shouted after him. "The hell with it. You won't make it. Save your strength!"

But Kostik moved hurriedly among the hummocks, leaping over cracks in the ice, stumbling, falling and quickly getting up again, as if afraid he would be followed and forced to return.

"He'll waste his strength," Ignat muttered. "It's a terrible path. I'll go with him. It will be easier together." He made a move to begin, but the professor stopped him.

"No," he said sternly. "Let him go alone. The boy is becoming a man."

Two hours later Kostik returned, exhausted, but happy.

"Here it is," he said, out of breath. "Here," and he collapsed in the snow.

The three of them inched forward. They reached the foothills, where they threw themselves on the ground and lay motionless for a long time. Then they again moved on. They were no longer walking, but crawling, holding on to the sharp protrusions in the cliffs, leaving a trail of dark spots in the snow. One resembled an outstretched man: it was a fur coat left by one of the three. Further there was a second coat, and then a third. Like three bodies in the snow. Then there was a scarf, a hat, gloves—landmarks on the way to the pass.

The men climbed higher and higher. Finally they crossed the ridge. Now they were on their way to being rescued.

...Two o'clock in the morning. A huge, copper-red sun

hung in the northeast. Low clouds passed, darkening it slightly. They raced by, crimson and fluffy like smoke. Like smoke billowing above blast-furnaces at night.

It was empty and quiet in the gulf. Drifts of snow shifted near the abandoned truck. The wind moved them about...

...Cities will rise here.

1938

Translated by Tracy Kuehn

NIKOLAI TIKHONOV

(1896–1979)

The life of Nikolai Tikhonov was crowded with historical events and vivid personal impressions. As he said himself, "I sometimes feel as if I have lived several lives."

Tikhonov was born into a family a long way, as he put it, from art or science of any kind. His father was a barber, his mother a tailor-ess. In early childhood, he displayed unusual literary abilities and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. "My frenzied literary occupations ... were treated by my parents as a frivolous, useless but harmless enthusiasm," he recalled.

On the outbreak of the First World War, Tikhonov went to the front as a volunteer. He became a soldier in a cavalry regiment of hussars, although he only saw a horse for the first time at the front. In the year of the October Revolution, his poems were read at political meetings and at Red Army amateur literary evenings.

In the 1920s and 1930s he travelled all over Central Asia and the

Caucasus, studying the life and customs of various tribes and peoples and satisfying his long-standing passion for the East, with which he was first smitten in his boyhood.

Tikhonov published new collections of poems and translated Georgian, Armenian and Daghestan poets. He also did considerable public work. In 1935, as a member of the Soviet delegation, he attended the Paris Congress in Defence of Progress and Peace.

Particularly important in Tikhonov's life and work, however, was the defence of Leningrad during the Second World War. "Nine hundred days of the battle for Leningrad—it is a book which mankind has yet to read. I had studied the military history of battles and sieges since boyhood and I could testify," wrote Tikhonov, "that there was no example in history comparable to that of Leningrad and its defenders...Verse and prose, essays and short stories, articles, leaflets and posters—everything was mobilized for action. We war correspondents at the Leningrad Front shared with the civilian population all the burdens of the siege and every conceivable form of privation..."

Tikhonov's best stories date back to this period; they were written under the direct impression of what he saw and experienced.

*THE MOMENT**

There are moments when nature around us suddenly manifests itself in all the triumph of its life-giving force, in all its splendour, in all its inexhaustible wealth, in all its incomparability, in one of those countless revelations which, at that moment, seems unique and divined by you and you alone.

To experience this, there is no need of a solemn grove of palm-trees on the shore of the ocean, there is no need of fantastic cliffs swathed in clouds. It is enough if it is a particle of the landscape typical of your native country. All you need is to be surrounded by a grove of silver birches or a wide field, with the autumnally misty sky low overhead. Even if it happens in the city, in a park, where the sound of tram bells and car horns comes to you through the trees, you may nevertheless be a witness of that profound moment.

And in the nature of things, in the concentration of the artist seeking the ultimate depths of creative revelation, subtleties of colour and word suddenly resolve themselves into that real, unrepeatable moment to which we apply an old word—inspiration.

Such a moment, filled with sensations of life's efflorescence, is so rare in the life of a young person still only struggling to guess what matters most in the long road that lies ahead, sometimes becomes manifest in all its sublime solemnity and sublime inexorability. Perhaps it is what we call an act of heroism.

Apropos of this, I would like to tell about a certain modest little girl named Zhenya Stasyuk.

She was a pupil in the ninth class, and for reasons of

health had been kept there for one more year. This circumstance alone shows that she was not of superhuman physique. Indeed, she was perhaps the most inconspicuous among the typical city girls. Small, fragile, as her closest friends described her, with fine, correct facial features, complexion of a delicate cream, big blue eyes and long, fine eyelashes.

She tried not to stand out because she was keenly aware of her physical defect: she was lame. This disability did more than embarrass her; it tormented her and was forever reminding her of its existence. Consequently, some amusements suitable to her age were denied to her. She could not run and she could not dance. "Cripple" is not a word to delight the ear of a young girl.

She was, however, very skilful at putting on bandages and dressings when she was training to be a nurse. She lived near Leningrad in a small town through which a narrow river flowed, and the houses were not very big, and an enormous factory as old as a fortress was the only true source of the noisy new life. It was continually adding on new blocks; it grew outwards and upwards, and its ceaseless roar filled the whole neighbourhood for a long way round.

In a small town like this, with its regular, routine working life, people daydream no less than in the biggest cities. Spring evenings there are filled with the voices of young people, laughter and songs. How the life of the little school-girl would have turned out no one could have said if ominous and terrible events had not descended on the town with the suddenness of the most violent storm.

On the very first day when Hitler's hordes violated her homeland's frontier, Zhenya, like the other volunteers, was moved into barracks.

The days went by like an endless nightmare. The artillery bombardment never ceased. Exercise books, school, strolls and parties now seemed a long way away. The lights disappeared. In the evenings, the town was plunged into the darkness of rainy, gloomy autumn nights.

So there she was, with hands until recently always ink-stained, bandaging the wounded and, all covered with blood, listening to their groans and mutterings, cutting off bandages, giving the men something to drink, consol-

ing them and even shouting at the ones whose spirits had fallen particularly low. She felt like a grain of sand carried away by a hurricane raging over the town.

Until this time, she had never spent the night out of doors, in a pit; had never lain on wet clay, pressing her pack to her coarse greatcoat for hours on end and keeping her hands warm by pushing them into her sleeves. She now lived only by what was around her. All the rest of the world had ceased to exist. That world had been bright, and warm and joyful. In the one that had arrived, she saw only suffering and a harshness for which, she feared, she would not have the strength. But she could not ask to be sent somewhere away from it all.

Limping amid the narrow, hastily dug trenches, stumbling, crawling over the sodden meadow, getting soaked, shivering with cold, she would feel a secret thrill of pride when a wounded man said to her, lips tight with pain, almost inaudibly: "Thank you, my dear!" or "Oh, and you're such a little thing!" Those who were older called her sister.

She did not understand what these soldiers and commanders were doing, moving day and night around her, festooned with weapons, packs and grenades. She was always frightened when a shell exploded near by so that her ears rang and her legs became soft as putty.

Tired out she fell asleep just where she was, crouching down, her cheek pressed against the side of the pit on the bottom of which lay her pack and gas-mask, and also the mess-tin in which they had brought her a few boiled potatoes. She slept in the break between tending the wounded and she dreamed of a school holiday at which all her comrades had gathered. There were many flowers, and someone began letting off rockets, and red and green snakes hung in the sky, and then a great orange moon rose and all went to the railway station. It was decorated as never before with flags and flowers. The train brought a great many people; they all were joking and laughing. Then she flew away somewhere, and in her dream she was amused; she kept remembering her nanny's words: "You're still growing!" But the flower-decked train suddenly disintegrated into black lorries which began to circle round her, growling, trying to run her over... She ran between them and could

not understand, was it in jest or in earnest that these bel-lowing black machines were trying to crush her? The thunder became so loud that she woke up.

For a moment, she could not imagine where she was. It was already dark, everything was booming round her and shell-bursts were mingled with the sporadic stuttering of machine-guns. Her hand, pressed against the side of the pit while she slept, had gone numb with pins and needles. She felt so helpless and so lonely, thrown down on to the bottom of the cold, clayey pit. Night breathed cold and danger. She sensed people lying in wait round her, and from the hubbub of voices and various other sounds she understood only that a violent battle had begun. At that moment, someone called her.

“Zhenya, dressing wanted! ”

A wounded man slithered down in the pit, supported by one of the nurses. He slid down in silence and landed at her feet like a dark sack. On looking closer, she saw that he was clutching a submachine-gun in one hand and his eyes were almost glittering in the dark. She already knew that glitter of pain held back by tightly clenched teeth. She started, finally came to herself and, with a strong movement which she had mastered recently, she propped the wounded man up against the side of the pit and began bandaging him. He was hit in the shoulder. Half-embracing him, she wound on the bandages, no longer afraid of coming into contact with the wet, sticky something with which his greatcoat was soaked. She put the submachine-gun carefully beside her so that it wouldn't be in the way and at the same time would be handy, so that he wouldn't have to hunt for it in dark when she had him carried away.

When she had finished bandaging him, the wounded man sighed noisily but said nothing. Only his right hand kept moving all the time, as if he wanted to reassure himself that it was working and was afraid that at any moment it might become like the left one, which he was afraid to touch.

In order to say something, she turned to the wounded man, bending right down to his muddy, damp and sweat-bedewed face.

“What's it like up there? With our people?”

“Bad! ” he said suddenly in a clear voice. “Bad,” he

repeated, and fell silent.

"You can't mean it!" she said in alarm.

She felt uneasy at that clear voice. She knew that, under the impression of what they have just been through, the wounded always imagine that things are bad. The shooting had become exceptionally intense. A shower of fire seemed to be raining down on to the dark, dirty nocturnal land.

But by the light of the flares and the glow in the sky she saw, from over yonder where the firing was raging, dark figures walking, pushing past her, diving into the nearby pits and disappearing somewhere.

Her heart sank. She lifted her head over the edge of the pit and nearly climbed out of it, peering into the dark. Men were coming straight at her, stooping, their heads down between their shoulders. The first who reached her pit stopped, peering to see if he could jump over it.

"What's going on there?" she asked. "Where are you going, Comrade?"

The soldier standing over her and looking even taller because of this, said hoarsely:

"Who's that?"

"I'm a nurse. Careful, there's a pit here," she replied. "What's going on over there?"

"Over there," answered the soldier, and his rifle seemed to waver strangely in his hand, "it's a lost cause, girl. The Germans are firing, there's just about nobody left alive..."

"Where are your commanders?" she asked, clutching him by the greatcoat.

"The commanders have all been killed," replied the soldier in a muffled voice and, bending over, he pressed her warm little hand. "Don't hold on, let me go; and get away from here, or you're done for..."

With one bound he disappeared into the darkness and jumped down into the next trench.

"What is this?" she wondered. "They're running. Running away. And the Germans are coming after them. And they'll come here and they'll jump across, like that soldier, into the next trench, and then on and on, to the town, and it'll all be over..."

A whole group was approaching. Looking at those figures wavering in the light of the flares, she trembled all

over with chagrin and pain. What was she to do? She glanced round the spaces of a night, so wild, so dark and so enormous that before it she was simply nothing, a blade of grass that would be burned up by the tiniest fragment of the first shell to explode.

Suddenly, she felt stronger than the night that was breathing death at her, and the dark void that filled her with terror, and those big running men with the lowered rifles, and that evil, invisible enemy who was lighting up the gloom with flares and firing so noisily, terribly and unceasingly.

Something gripped her heart, but it was not terror or pain. It was a sensation of flight, as in her sleep, when she had burst out laughing: "I'm still growing!" Her legs became firm, and her little hands balled themselves into fists. She was quivering all over with something incredible. Never mind! She didn't care that they were shooting, that the shell fragments were whistling overhead; she didn't care that she was small and weak, she didn't care that she hadn't learned how to command. This was that moment when extreme rapture possessed her from head to foot. What did she know of life, this little ex-schoolgirl? Suddenly she became wise, implacable, merciless and terribly proud. And pitiless. She seized the submachine-gun and rose to her full height before the fleeing men who were now almost level with her.

"Stop!" she cried in such a thin yet such a commanding voice that the men halted. She fired a short burst along the trench into the darkness.

"Stop!" she shouted and she was already running towards those who had halted, unable to grasp what this little girl wanted of them as she limped over the pitted field. She went right up to them. She could not distinguish their faces, but she sensed that many eyes were looking at her. Behind the ones standing in front of her she could see others materializing out of the gloom.

"Stop!" she said once more. "Running away? Come on, go back! Follow me! I'll see what kind of heroes you turn out to be! Forward! Turn round!"

And she stood with the submachine-gun, not aware of what she was saying and doing. She only trusted the great something that was making her whole being tremble. And

they, those panting soldiers, humbly, as it seemed to her, turned round. She went back with them towards the place from which the bullets were whistling and the shells flying.

They came to another group. She seized by the arm a little soldier with a comical adolescent's beard.

"Where are you from? Where've you been?"

"Over there," he said pointing to the right.

"Go back! And they're with you? Go back, all of you! Move, and look lively!"

They did not contradict her. They turned round raggedly, and now she was leading them, gripping the submachine-gun and almost smiling. She did not know that she was smiling, and no one could see this in the dark.

She turned back more and more groups. She led them to the trenches they had abandoned and asked:

"You were here? Here you stay—not one step back! "

She did not add, "If you take one step, I'll kill you", but she knew for certain that she would fire, that nothing would stop her, that these confused, heavy, grim men would not dare resist her, her strength, her will, the frail little schoolgirl who could hardly breathe because of her damp greatcoat, the collar of which was chafing her neck because of the fast walking pace and because of the terrible excitement.

Perhaps there was what the newspaper correspondents call "hell let loose" all round. Yes, it was like that. Once, a soldier walking beside her threw her violently to the ground and overhead there was such a bang that she felt as if her head might burst at the shock; but the next moment she was already on her feet again and the one who had pushed her down said in embarrassment:

"Sorry! I hit you hard, or we wouldn't have come out of it alive, I didn't hurt you, did I?"

But she did not answer and carried on further, stooping slightly. She skirted trenches, bandaged the wounded, watched so that no one would dare sneak back again, asked how many rounds they had, fired into the darkness from which the shells and rockets were still streaming, lay hugging the ground in shell craters and crawled over the

chill grass, scratching her hands on tins and stones. The night was endless...

The shells never ceased exploding. Mines burst with a hoarse grunt and multicoloured tracers streamed past.

She asked one boy who was wheezing loudly in the semi-darkness of the trench:

"D'you know where Battalion HQ is?"

"The devil he does," answered another voice for him.

"Why, Comrade Commander?"

She was struck by that answer. They were calling her Comrade Commander. No doubt these men would laugh like anything when they saw her in the clear light of day.

But she promptly replied:

"Do you know where HQ is?"

"I do, only it'll be a bit tricky getting there now."

"You'll go there and take a note from me, understand?"

"I understand, Comrade Commander. Write away." She took out her notepad and wrote briefly that a commander was wanted; instead of a runner, she was sending a soldier with the note.

The soldier scrambled over a hummock and melted into the darkness. Night continued. A cold, penetrating wind rose. Her eyelids stuck together and her hands and feet began to tremble with fatigue. The intoxicating rapture of the first minutes had long since passed. She wanted to lie down and go to sleep. But she sat there with the submachine-gun between her knees and looked in front of her, deafened by the noise, calmly listening to the bullets whining as they ricocheted near by.

Then she summoned up all her will-power and, yawning into her fist, crawled to check her trenches. The men were lying, sitting, bent double, whispering, coughing and firing. Wounded men cried out from time to time.

...Before her stood a commander, tall, in leather belt and cross-straps, with a revolver at his waist and a gas-mask, broad-faced, frowning as if unable to believe what he saw.

"Who's in charge here?" he asked, looking sternly at the little figure huddled up with a submachine-gun in a bend of the trench. Big eyes were looking at him, and he thought this frightened girl was going to say, "I want to go home to my mother! I'm scared! "

But she said quietly and slowly:

"I'm in charge here! "

He brought his hand up to the peak of his cap and said quickly and distinctly:

"I have come to take over the sector by order of the battalion commander. Was it you who sent the note?"

"I did," she replied even more quietly. "I'll hand over everything to you. Let's go! "

1942-43

Translated by Alex Miller

KONSTANTIN SIMONOV

(1915—1979)

Konstantin Simonov's name is forever linked with the Second World War for readers who went through this war themselves or who grew up amid the fresh recollections of their elders. Simonov's poem "Wait for Me" was known to everyone, both in the rear and at the fighting fronts.

In the course of his prolific and successful literary career, Konstantin Simonov published many novels, short stories, articles, plays, poems and essays, and all of them in one way or another were linked with the war. Hundreds of books have been written about it, and hundreds more are yet to be written, but Simonov's cannot be mistaken for anyone else's, they stand apart owing to his thorough acquaintance with all the aspects of wartime life and his intimate knowledge of the fighting soldiers' gory everyday. "I have witnessed many operations and major events," he wrote. "Only rarely did I go where there was a lull, I was usually sent where something was brewing or happening. I had the chance to draw comparisons, I saw our Army in action in all the periods of the war."

As a war correspondent and a tremendously popular writer, Simonov met and spoke with people of different military ranks and different arms of service. From his own observations he knew what a soldier felt just before battle and what it was like for the commanding officer who was answerable for the outcome of the operation. He witnessed the great battles of Moscow, of Stalingrad, and on the Kursk Bulge. In a submarine he went to the shores of Roumania, he was taken in a plane to the Yugoslav partisans, and he was on the Elbe on the day the Soviet and American armies met.

The war with Nazi Germany was indeed a great patriotic war for the Soviet people, and this naturally enhanced the role and importance of every single person fighting in this war. Victory or defeat depended on the strength of his spirit, on his ability to stand firm in conditions that human flesh could hardly bear. And it was to the investigation of this problem that Simonov dedicated his best works; following Tolstoy's tradition he tried to present the war in, as he put it, "its real expression—in blood, in suffering, in death".

*THE THIRD ADJUTANT**

The commissar was firmly convinced that brave men were killed less frequently than cowards. He liked repeating this maxim and got angry when people disagreed.

In the division he was both loved and feared. He had his own special way of getting newcomers used to war. He found out about a man on the move. He would pick him up at the divisional HQ or in one of the regiments and take him on his rounds, never letting him out of his sight all day.

If an attack had to be made, they would join in side by side.

With those who passed the test the commissar would renew his acquaintance in the evening.

"What's your name?" he would ask abruptly.

The surprised officer would give his name.

"Well, mine's Kornev. We've been in attack together, crawled on our bellies together, so now we know each other."

During the first week after his arrival in the division two of his adjutants were killed one after the other.

The first had panicked and climbed out of the trench to crawl back. He had been cut down by a machine-gun.

That evening, on his way back to headquarters, the commissar walked indifferently past the dead adjutant, without even turning his head.

The second adjutant had got a bullet through his chest during an attack. He lay in the captured trench on his

back, gasping for breath and pleading for something to drink. There was no water. The field in front of the parapet was scattered with the German dead. Beside one of them lay a water-bottle.

The commissar stared through his field-glasses, trying to make out whether the water-bottle was full or empty.

Then he heaved his bulky and no longer young body over the breastworks and walked across the field in his usual unhurried fashion.

For some unknown reason the Germans held their fire. They opened up only when he reached the water-bottle, lifted it, shook it and, tucking it under his arm, turned to go.

They were shooting at his back. Two bullets hit the bottle. He stopped up the holes with his fingers and walked on, holding the bottle in front of him.

When he had jumped back into the trench, he carefully handed the bottle to one of the men.

"Give him a drink! "

"Suppose you'd got there and found it empty?" someone inquired curiously.

"I'd have come back and sent you out to look for a full one! " the commissar said, measuring the questioner with an angry glance.

He often did things that he, as divisional commissar, need not have done. But he thought of that only when he had done them. Then he would get cross with himself and with those who reminded him of his action.

That was the situation now. After bringing the water-bottle, he took no further notice of the adjutant and seemed to have forgotten all about him in his observation of the field of battle.

Fifteen minutes later he startled the battalion commander with an unexpected question.

"Well, have you sent him off to hospital?"

"Can't be done, Comrade Commissar. We'll have to wait till dark."

"He'll die before then." And the commissar turned away, as though the matter were closed.

Five minutes later two soldiers, crouching under the

flying bullets, carried the adjutant's still body back across the lumpy field.

The commissar coolly watched them go. His measure of risk was the same for himself as for others. Men got killed—that was war. But the brave got killed less frequently.

The two men were pushing on bravely without dropping flat or scrambling for cover. They never forgot they were carrying a wounded man. So Kornev decided that they would make it.

That night, on the way back to headquarters, the commissar called in at the field hospital.

"Well, how's he getting on, have you put him right?" he asked the surgeon.

Kornev was of the opinion that everything in war could and should be done at equal speed, whether it was delivering a message, making an attack or healing the wounded.

And when the surgeon told him that the adjutant had died from loss of blood, he looked up in surprise.

"Do you realize what you're saying?" he asked quietly, hooking his hand under the surgeon's shoulder-strap and pulling him. "Our men carried him two versts under fire so that he should live, and you tell me he's dead. Why did they carry him then?"

He said nothing about his own expedition for the water-bottle.

The surgeon shrugged.

"And added to that," the commissar went on, noting this gesture, "he was the kind of man who ought to have lived. Yes, he ought to have lived," he repeated crossly. "You're no good at your job."

And he walked out to his car without another word.

The surgeon watched him go. Of course, the commissar was wrong. From any logical point of view, he had just made a foolish remark. But his words had carried such strength and conviction that the surgeon felt for a moment that there was some truth in the idea that the brave ought not to die and, if they did, it was because someone was not doing his job properly.

"Nonsense!" the surgeon said aloud, trying to shake off this strange idea.

But it would not be shaken off. He could almost see

the two soldiers carrying the wounded adjutant across that endless lumpy field.

"Mikhail Lvovich," he turned to his assistant who had just come out on to the porch for a smoke, and said suddenly, as if it were something he had meant to say all along. "We'll have to set up two dressing stations further forward, with doctors at them."

The commissar reached HQ only as day was breaking. He was in a bad mood and dealt quickly with the people he wished to see, sending them off with brief and mostly grumpy parting shots. This was his method and there was an element of cunning in it. The commissar liked people to leave him feeling a little angry. He believed that man has the power to do everything. He never reprimanded a man for not being able to do something, but only for having been able to do something and not having done it. If a man had done a lot, the commissar would reproach him for not having done more. People think better when they are a little angry. He liked to break off a conversation in mid-sentence, so that only the main thing struck home. This was how he had made the whole division aware of his presence. He never spent a minute with anybody without trying to implant something that the man would think about until their next meeting.

In the morning he received the report of yesterday's losses. As he read it he remembered the surgeon. Of course, it has been tactless to tell this old and experienced doctor that he was no good at his job: but never mind, let him think it over. Perhaps he would get angry and have some good idea. He did not regret what he had said. The saddest part of it was that the adjutant had died. But he did not allow his mind to dwell on that for long. In these months of war there would have been far too many to sorrow over. He would remember all that after the war, when sudden death would be an accident. All death was sudden nowadays. There was no other kind and it was time to get used to it. And yet a sadness still remained and there was a special asperity in his voice when he told the chief of staff that his adjutant had been killed and another must be found for him.

The third adjutant was a small, fair-haired, blue-eyed lad, fresh from school and only just arrived at the front.

On the first day of their acquaintance, when he had to accompany the commissar to a forward battalion, across a frozen autumn field with mortar shells bursting all over it, he never lagged behind for a moment. He kept at the commissar's side, as it was his adjutant's duty to do so. And besides, this big, heavily built man with his unhurried walk seemed invulnerable; if you kept up with him nothing would happen to you.

When the mortar shells started falling thick and fast and it became clear that the Germans were definitely after them, the commissar and his adjutant occasionally dropped flat.

But almost before they were down, before the smoke had cleared from the nearby explosion the commissar was up again and moving on.

"Keep going," he muttered grumpily. "We can't waste time lying about here."

They had nearly reached the trenches when they were straddled. One shell burst ahead and another behind.

The commissar rose to his feet, brushing himself down.

"There you are, you see," he said, pointing back at the small shell-hole behind them. "If we'd funk'd it and hung about, they'd have got us nicely. It's always best to push on ahead."

"But what if we had gone on faster, look at that..." and without finishing, the adjutant nodded towards the hole in front.

"Nothing of the kind," the commissar retorted. "They were aiming at us here and the shell fell short. If we had been there, they would have aimed at us there and fallen short again."

The adjutant smiled involuntarily, thinking that the commissar must be joking. But the commissar's face wore an expression of utter seriousness. He spoke with total conviction. And the adjutant was imbued with faith in this man, the instant faith born of war that lasts a lifetime. He did the final hundred paces quite close to the commissar, almost elbow to elbow.

That was how they got to know each other.

A month passed. The southern roads were either crusted with ice, or impossibly muddy.

Rumour had it that somewhere in the rear an army was being prepared for a counter-offensive, but as yet the depleted division was still fighting bloody defensive battles.

It was a dark night, a night of the southern autumn. The commissar was sitting in his dug-out. He had got his muddy boots off and was arranging them to dry on the iron stove.

That morning the divisional commander had been gravely wounded. The chief of staff rested his wounded arm in its black sling and drummed his fingers on the table; it pleased him that he was able to do so, that his fingers were beginning to obey him again.

"All right, then, you old stubborn," he continued their interrupted conversation, "let us suppose Kholodilin was killed because he was scared, but the general was a brave man, don't you think?"

"Not 'was' but 'is'. And he'll live," the commissar said and turned away, as if the matter were closed.

But the chief of staff tugged his sleeve and said quietly, so that no one else should hear his sorrowful words: "Live he may. It'll be a good thing if he does, though I doubt it. But Mironov won't live, nor will Zavodchikov, nor Gavrilenko. They're dead and yet they were all brave men. What does that make of your theory?"

"I have no theory," the commissar retorted abruptly. "I simply know that in similar circumstances brave men are killed less frequently than cowards. And if you're so full of the names of those who were brave but were nevertheless killed, it's because a coward is forgotten even before he's buried, but when a brave man dies, people remember him, talk about him and write about him. We remember only the names of the brave. And that's all there is to it. If you call that my theory, you're at liberty to do so. A theory that helps people not to be afraid is a good theory."

The adjutant entered the dug-out. In a month his face had darkened and his eyes looked tired. But in all other respects he was still the boy the commissar had seen on that first day. Coming to attention, he reported that all was well on the peninsula from which he had just returned, except that Captain Polyakov, the battalion commander, had been wounded.

"Who's taken over from him?" the commissar asked.

"Lieutenant Vassilyev from the Fifth Company."

"And who's commanding the Fifth Company?"

"A sergeant."

The commissar pondered for a minute.

"Are you very cold?" he asked the adjutant.

"I am, as a matter of fact."

"Have some vodka."

The commissar poured half a glass of vodka from a kettle and the lieutenant drank it in one gulp, only pausing to throw open his greatcoat.

"And now back you go," the commissar said. "Because I'm worried. You've got to be there to see what happens. You're my eyes on the peninsula. Off you go."

The adjutant rose. He fastened the hook on his greatcoat collar with the slowness of a man who would like to stay in the warm just a minute longer. But he went as soon as he had fastened it. Ducking low to avoid bumping his head on the door-frame, he disappeared into the darkness. The door banged behind him.

"Good lad," the commissar said, following him with his eyes. "That's the kind I believe in. I believe they'll come through; and they believe that no bullet can get me. And that's the main thing. Isn't it, Colonel?"

The chief of staff drummed slowly on the table. A man of natural courage himself, he preferred not to indulge in theories about his own or other people's bravery. But now he felt the commissar was right.

"Yes," he said.

The logs crackled in the stove. The commissar slept, slumped forward over the field map on the table with his arms spread wide as if he wanted to take back all the land shown on it.

In the morning the commissar went out himself to the peninsula. It was a day that he did not care to remember afterwards. The night before the Germans had made a secret landing and their fierce assault had wiped out the whole of the Fifth Company, to the last man.

All that day he had to do what, as commissar of the division, he should never have been doing. In the morning he gathered every man he could find and led them into the

attack three times.

The ringing sand, hardened by the first frosts, was pitted with shell-holes and splashed with blood. The whole enemy force was either killed or taken prisoner. Those who tried to swim back to their own shore drowned in the icy winter water.

Relinquishing the rifle with its dark blood-stained bayonet that he no longer needed, the commissar walked about the peninsula. Only the dead could have told him what had happened here the night before. But even the dead can speak. Dead Red Army men lay among the German corpses. Some of them had died in the trenches, stabbed by bayonets, still gripping their battered rifles. Others, who had not stood their ground, lay in the open field, in the frozen wintry steppe; they had run and this was where the bullets had caught them. The commissar walked slowly across the silent battlefield, noting the postures of the dead and their immobile faces; he was trying to make out how each man had behaved in the last minutes of his life. Even death did not reconcile him to cowardice. Had it been possible, he would have buried the brave separately from the cowards. Let there be a borderline between them after death, just as there had been in life.

He was also looking for his adjutant. His adjutant could not have run away and could not have been taken prisoner, so he must be here, among the dead.

At last, far behind the trenches where the men had fought and died the commissar found him. The adjutant was lying stretched out, one arm twisted awkwardly beneath his back, and the other holding a pistol in a death grip. There was dried blood on the front of his tunic.

The commissar stood over him for a while, then called one of the officers and ordered him to open the tunic and inspect the wound.

He would have looked himself but his right arm had been pierced by several grenade splinters during one of the attacks and hung helplessly at his side. He stared in irritation at his tunic, with a sleeve cut off to the shoulder, and at the bloody, hastily applied bandage. He was angry not so much at the wound and the pain, as at the fact he had been wounded. He, whom the division believed to be invulner-

able! This wound had come at just the wrong moment, it would have to be healed and forgotten, as soon as possible.

The officer bent over the adjutant and unbuttoned his tunic and vest.

"Bayonet," he said, looking up, then bent again over the adjutant and for a whole minute held his ear to the still body.

When he rose there was surprise on his face.

"He's still breathing," he said.

"Breathing?"

The commissar's face betrayed no excitement.

"Two men, here!" he commanded sharply. "Pick him up and take him straight to the dressing station. He may still live."

He turned and strode on across the field.

Will he live or not? The question intermingled with others. How had he acted in the fighting? Why had he been behind everyone else? And all these questions added up to one thing. If all was well, if he had fought bravely, he would live, surely he would live.

And a month later, when the adjutant, paler and thinner, but still the fair-haired, blue-eyed boy he had been before, returned from hospital to the divisional command post, the commissar asked no questions and only offered his sound left hand to shake.

"You know, I never even got as far as the Fifth Company," the adjutant said. "I got stuck on the crossing and had about another hundred paces to go when..."

"I know," the commissar interrupted him. "I know all about it, you needn't explain. I know you're a fine lad and I'm glad you've pulled through."

He looked enviously at this boy who, one month after a mortal wound, was strong and fit again, then looked at his own bandaged arm and said regretfully, "The colonel and I aren't what we used to be. I've had this over a month and it's not healed yet. And his has been more than two months. That's how we command the division—two-handed. With his right and my left..."

ALEXEI TOLSTOY

(1882—1945)

Alexei Tolstoy was born into the landed aristocracy. His mother, née Turgeneva, wrote and published short stories and novels in the spirit of the liberal ideas of the 1860s. On her advice, Alexei Tolstoy wrote his first story when he was only ten years old.

At the time of the Revolution he was already a well-known writer, the author of novels "The Lame Master" and "Two Lives", a cycle of stories "Beyond the Volga", the short story "Mishuka Nalymov", the plays "Darling", "Rocket", "Day of Battle", etc. In his creative ambitions he was allied with the camp of the realist writers: Gorky, Bunin, Shmelyov, Kuprin, Surguchyov, and the rest. Gorky thought highly of Tolstoy's talent, and wrote: "Take note of the new Tolstoy, Alexei, an unquestionably big and powerful writer who exposes with cruel truthfulness the mental and economic decline of the modern nobility."

Alexei Tolstoy rapturously welcomed the bourgeois-democratic revolution in February 1917, but the scale of the popular insurrection

frightened him, he was confused by the events that followed the October Revolution, and in 1919 emigrated. However, estrangement from Russia proved intolerable for Tolstoy, a wholly Russian writer. Later he wrote: "That was the hardest period in my whole life. Living in emigration I understood what it meant to be an outcast, a person estranged from his country, a barren, weightless writer, needed by no one under any circumstances. In the spring of 1922, I returned to Soviet Russia with my family."

At home once more, he wrote his greatest novels: the trilogy "The Ordeal" and "Peter the Great".

This is what Gorky had written to the author of "Peter the Great": "You know that I love and hold very high your big, clever, jolly talent. Yes indeed, I take yours to be a jolly talent with a sparkle and a cunning little smile, but this quality actually holds something like third place with me, because above all else yours is simply a big, truly Russian talent, with a truly Russian cleverness."

*THE RUSSIAN CHARACTER**

The Russian character! It is too impressive a title, of course, for a story of no great length. But there it is, it happens to be the Russian character that I want to talk about.

Yes, the Russian character—describe it, if you can! I could tell you about plenty of heroic feats, but there are so many that I should be at a loss which to choose. Luckily, however, a friend of mine has come to my rescue with a story from his own life. I shan't tell you how he fought the fascists, though he wears the Gold Star and sports a row of medals across his chest. He is a simple, quiet, ordinary man—a collective farmer from a village on the Volga in Saratov Region. But he used to stand out among others because of his powerful physique and good looks. You just couldn't help staring when you saw him climb out of the turret of his tank—a veritable god of war! He would leap to the ground, pull off his helmet, freeing his thick hair, now damp with sweat, wipe his smudged face with a rag, and then—he always did it—smile with the sheer joy of being alive.

When a man's at war and constantly facing death he rises above his ordinary self. All the trashy stuff that doesn't matter peels off him, like dead skin after sunburn, and only the kernel, the real man, is left. Of course, the kernel is tougher in some men than in others, but even those with a few flaws in them are trying hard, because everyone wants to be a good and loyal comrade. But my friend, Yegor Dryomov, was strict in his ways even before the war—he had enormous respect for his mother, Maria Polikarpovna,

and his father, Yegor Yegorovich. "My father's a man of dignity. The first thing you feel about him is that he has self-respect. 'You'll see a lot of things in the world, son,' he says, 'and you'll go abroad, but mind you always keep your pride in being a Russian.' "

Yegor was going to marry a girl from the same village on the Volga. Our lads talk a lot about their girls and their wives, especially when it's quiet on the front line, and cold, and there's a fire in the dug-out and they've had their supper. The things you hear sometimes, it's enough to make your ears curl up. Someone starts off, for instance: "What's love?" "Love arises out of respect," says one. And another'll say: "Nothing of the kind! Love's a habit. A man doesn't just love his wife, he loves his father and mother, he even loves animals." "Blow me, what a fool! " says a third. "When a man's in love, he's throbbing with it. He goes about as if he's drunk." And they keep it up like that for an hour or two till the sergeant-major chimes in with his voice of authority and goes right to the heart of the matter.

Yegor Dryomov, no doubt because he was embarrassed by such discussions, only dropped me a hint about his girl. She was, he told me, a very good girl, and if she said she'd wait for him it meant she'd be there when he came, even if he came back on one leg.

Nor did he like to talk much about his battle record. "I don't like recalling such things," he would say with a frown and pull hard at his cigarette. We heard about the battle exploits of his tank from the crew. Driver Chuvilyov told a particularly impressive story.

"...We'd only just turned round and what did I see coming over the hill... 'Comrade Lieutenant,' I shouted, 'a Tiger! ' 'Step on it! ' he shouts back. So off I went, weaving through the fir-trees, making use of what cover there was. The Tiger groped about with its gun like a blind man, then fired and missed. But the lieutenant let him have it right in the side—what a wallop! Then he got another shot in on the turret and the Tiger toppled back with its snout in the air. And with the third shot the smoke started pouring out of every slit, and then the flames shot up about three hundred feet high. Out comes the crew through the escape hatch and Ivan Lapshin mows 'em down with his machine-

gun... Well, that cleared the road for us, and in five minutes we came tearing into the village. What a lark! The nazis went scuttling all over the place. And it was muddy, mind you, so a lot of 'em lost their boots and went hopping around in their socks, making for the barn. So Comrade Lieutenant gave me the order: 'Ram the barn!' We turned our gun round back to front and went smack into it—Cor! There were beams and bricks and planks crashing down on us, and the nazis who'd climbed into the loft. I swung round and went in again to iron the place out. The ones that were left put their hands up and yelled '*Hitler kaputt!*' "

And that was how Lieutenant Yegor Dryomov fought until he had a stroke of bad luck. During the Battle of Kursk, in the later stages, when the Germans were hard pressed and had begun to give way, his tank, which was stationed in a wheat field on a hill, was hit by a shell that killed two of the crew outright. The next shell set it on fire. Driver Chuvilyov, who had escaped through the front hatch, climbed back onto the turret and managed to pull out the lieutenant—he was unconscious and his clothes were burning. Chuvilyov had only just dragged him clear when an explosion ripped the tank to pieces and hurled the turret about fifty yards. He threw handfuls of loose earth on the lieutenant's head and clothes to smother the flames, then dragged him from one shell hole to another till he found a first-aid post. "Why did I do it?" Chuvilyov said afterwards. "Because I could hear his heart still beating..."

Yegor Dryomov survived and didn't lose his sight, although his face was so badly burned that the bones were showing in places. He was in hospital for eight months. Plastic surgery restored his nose, lips, eyelids and ears. When the eight months were over and the bandages taken off, he looked in the glass at a face that was his, yet no longer his. The nurse who had given him the little pocket mirror turned away and cried. He gave the mirror back to her.

"I've known worse," he said. "I can get by."

But he never asked the nurse for her mirror again. Instead he would often feel his face, as though trying to get used to it. When the medical board declared him fit for non-combat-

ant service, he went straight to his general and asked permission to return to his regiment. "But you're disabled," said the general. "No, I'm not. I'm disfigured, but that doesn't matter. I'll soon be able to fight as well as I ever did." (Yegor noticed that the general tried to avoid looking at him during the interview, and this brought a grim smile to the blue slit that was his mouth.) He was granted twenty days' leave to complete his convalescence and went home to see his father and mother. That was last March.

He had expected to get a cart at the station but had to walk the ten miles to his village. The ground was still covered with snow. It was damp and deserted everywhere. The biting wind kept dragging open the flaps of his great-coat and howling loneliness in his ears. It was growing dark by the time he reached the village. Yes, there was the well with the long well-sweep creaking to and fro in the wind. The sixth cottage down the street was his father's house. Suddenly he halted, pushed his hands into his pockets and shook his head. Instead of going up to the front door, he cut across the patch of ground round the house and, sinking knee-deep in the snow, crouched by the low window and looked in at his mother. By the dim light of an oil lamp she was laying the table for supper. She still wore the same dark shawl on her head, still looked as quiet, unhurried and kind, but she had grown older, and her shoulders were very thin. If only I'd known, he thought, I'd have written every day, even if it was only a few words. She prepared her simple meal—a bowl of milk, a piece of bread, two spoons and a salt-cellar—and then standing at the table with her thin arms folded under her breast, she seemed to become lost in thought. As he watched his mother through the window, Yegor Dryomov realized that he couldn't possibly give her such a fright, that he mustn't let her poor little face crumple in despair.

Very well then! He opened the gate, stepped into the yard and knocked at the door. He heard his mother's voice ask from inside who was there. "Lieutenant Gromov, Hero of the Soviet Union," he replied.

His heart was thumping so violently that he had to lean against the door-post. No, his mother hadn't recognized his voice. He himself felt as if he was hearing it for the

first time, it had changed so much after all his operations. It was thick and hoarse.

"What do you want, son?" she asked.

"I've brought you greetings, Maria Polikarpovna, from your son, Senior Lieutenant Dryomov."

Then she opened the door, rushed out and grabbed his hands.

"Is he really alive, my Yegor? Is he well? Come inside, dear, come inside."

Yegor Dryomov sat down on the bench at the table in the very place where he had sat in the days before his legs were long enough to touch the floor, when his mother would sometimes stroke his curly head and say: "Eat up, my little swallow." He started telling her about her son, about himself. He told her in detail what he ate and drank, how well and happy he was, and free of hardship, and only briefly did he mention his tank battles.

"But tell me, isn't war frightening?" she interrupted, staring into his face with eyes that were focussed elsewhere.

"Yes, mother, of course, it is," he replied, "but you get used to it."

Yegor Yegorovich, his father, came in. He had also aged; his beard looked as if it had been sprinkled with flour. He eyed the guest, kicked the snow off his battered felt boots against the doorstep, slowly unwound his scarf, took off his overcoat, and walked over to the table and shook hands—ah, how well Yegor knew that broad, just hand of his father's! Asking no questions, because it was quite clear without that why this man with a row of medals was here, he sat down and also began to listen, with half-closed eyes.

The longer Lieutenant Dryomov sat there unrecognized and talked about himself as though he were someone else, the more impossible it became to throw off the pretence, to stand up and say: "Can't you recognize me, father and mother, disfigured though I am!" At his parents' table he felt both happy and hurt.

"Well, mother, let's have supper. Bring us something for our guest." Yegor Yegorovich opened the door of the little dresser. Yes, the match-box full of fish-hooks was still there, and so was the teapot with its chipped spout

and the dresser still smelled of bread crumbs and onion peel. Yegor Yegorovich took out a small decanter of vodka—only enough for two glasses—and sighed because he wouldn't be able to get any more. They sat down to supper, as they had in years gone by. And only after a while did Lieutenant Dryomov notice that his mother was following every movement of the hand in which he held his spoon. He gave a short laugh; his mother raised her eyes, and her face quivered with pain.

They talked of one thing and another, of what the spring would be like and whether the farmers would manage the sowing in time, and Yegor Yegorovich said that they might expect to see the end of the war this summer.

"Why do you think the war may end this summer, Yegor Yegorovich?"

"The people have got their dander up," Yegor Yegorovich replied. "They've been through death itself. There'll be no stopping them now. The fascists are finished."

Maria Polikarpovna asked: "You haven't told us when they'll give him leave to come home and see us. We haven't seen him for three years. I expect he's got much bigger and has grown a moustache. And being near to death every day, like he is, I dare say his voice has got harsher."

"Yes, when he comes back you mayn't even recognize him," said the lieutenant.

They made up his bed on the ledge over the stove, where he remembered every brick, every chink in the log wall, every knot in the ceiling. It all smelt of sheepskin and bread, of that home comfort that a man never forgets, even in the hour of death. The March wind whistled and murmured under the eaves. Behind the wooden partition his father snored gently. But his mother sighed and stirred restlessly on her bed; she was not asleep. The lieutenant lay still with his face in his hands. How can it be that she didn't recognize me, he was thinking.

In the morning he was wakened by the crackle of burning wood; his mother was quietly tending the stove. His footcloths, which she had washed, were hanging on a rope stretched from wall to wall. His boots had been cleaned and were standing by the door.

"Do you like millet pancakes?" she asked him.

He didn't answer at once. He climbed down from the stove, put on his tunic and belted it, and sat down on the bench barefooted.

"Does a Katya Malysheva live in your village? Andrei Malyshev's daughter?"

"She finished her course last year, she's our village school teacher. Do you want to see her?"

"Your son asked me to make sure I passed on his regards."

His mother sent the neighbours' daughter for her. Before the lieutenant had time to pull on his boots, Katya Malysheva was there. Her wide grey eyes were shining, her brows raised in wonder and her cheeks flushed with joy. The lieutenant almost groaned when she threw back her shawl onto her broad shoulders. If only he could kiss that warm fair hair! This was just how he had pictured her. Fresh, tender, merry, kind, beautiful—so beautiful that the whole cottage seemed to glow like gold when she entered it.

"Have you brought greetings from Yegor?" (He was standing with his back to the light and he merely nodded because he couldn't speak.) "Tell him I'm waiting for him day and night."

She came closer. Her eyes met his and she fell back a pace, as though something had struck her in the chest; she was frightened. That made up his mind—he wouldn't stay a day longer.

His mother made some millet pancakes with baked milk. He talked again about Lieutenant Dryomov, this time about his deeds of valour. He spoke harshly, without looking up at Katya, so that he shouldn't see in her sweet face the reflection of his disfigurement. Yegor Yegorovich wanted to go and ask for one of the collective farm's horses, but the lieutenant went off to the station on foot, as he had come. He was so overwhelmed by what had happened that he kept stopping and pressing his hands to his face, muttering hoarsely to himself:

"What shall I do now?"

He returned to his regiment, which had been brought back to the rear for reinforcement. And there he got such a welcome from his friends that it shifted the load off his heart. He decided that his mother needn't know about his misfortune for some time yet. And as for Katya—he would tear that thorn out of his flesh.

About two weeks later he received a letter from his mother.

"My darling son! I am afraid to write to you, for I hardly know what to think. We've had a visit from a man who said he came from you. He was a very good man but his face was badly disfigured. He was going to stay with us for a while but he changed his mind and left suddenly. And ever since, my son, I haven't been able to sleep a wink, because it seems to me that man was you. Yegor Yegorovich scolds me, 'You must be out of your mind, old woman,' he says. 'If it had been our son, do you think he wouldn't have told us? Why should he pretend if it was he? A man should be proud to have such a face as he had.' Yegor Yegorovich tries to talk me round, but my mother's heart knows otherwise—it was him, it was him, it tells me. That man slept on our stove and I took his greatcoat out in the yard to clean it, and I held it to my breast and wept because I knew it was you. Dear Yegor, please, for the love of Christ, write to me, tell me what happened. Or perhaps I have really gone out of my mind."

Well, Yegor Dryomov showed this letter to me, Ivan Sudarev, and, as he told me his story, he wiped his eyes on his sleeve. I said to him: "That's a clash of character for you! You're a fool, man, you're a fool. Write to your mother and ask her forgiveness. Don't drive her mad. A lot she cares about your appearance! She'll love you even more as you are now."

He wrote a letter the same day. "My dear parents, Maria Polikarpovna and Yegor Yegorovich, forgive me for my foolishness. It really was me, your son, who came to see you..." And so on and so forth, for another four pages, in small handwriting. He'd have written twenty, if he had had the time.

Some weeks later we were on the proving ground together, when a soldier came running up. "Someone wants to see you, Captain Dryomov," he said. Though he was standing stiffly at attention, the soldier looked as if someone was just about to treat him to a drink. We went down to the hut where Dryomov and I were living. I could see he was uneasy—he kept coughing and clearing his throat. He may be a tank soldier, I thought, but he's got nerves. He

went into the hut ahead of me and I heard his voice:

"Hullo, mother, it's me." I saw a little old woman clinging to his chest. When I looked round I noticed there was another woman in the room. Well, there must be other beautiful women about, she's not the only one, I'm sure, but I've never seen another like her.

He freed himself from his mother's embraces and turned to this girl. As I said before, his magnificent physique made him look like a god of war. "Katya!" he said. "Why did you come? You promised to wait for another man, not this—"

And before I went out into the porch, I heard her say: "Yegor, I'm going to live with you for ever and ever. I will love you truly, with all my heart. Don't send me away."

Yes, that's the Russian character! A man may seem ordinary enough, but when trouble comes, he is endowed with a mighty strength—the beauty of the human heart.

1942

Translated by Robert Daglish

ANDREI PLATONOV

(1899–1951)

Andrei Platonov started writing poetry as a youngster, and then proceeded to write short stories, publishing his first book in 1927.

From the first, Platonov dedicated himself body and soul to his writing. A passionate inventor and innovator he did not believe in following trodden paths. "Writing is a no less serious business than living, and does anyone live his life as simply a first attempt?" he wrote. "If life goes wrong it cannot be lived over differently a second time. And every book should also be written as the only one there can be, giving the reader no hope that the next book will be written better."

Platonov's heroes are ordinary people, and on the surface of it there is nothing outstanding about them. But then at the will of the author they disclose their fabulous spiritual riches: generosity, love, kindness, responsiveness. And he shows that these qualities were aroused in people by the cleansing storm of the Revolution.

He himself said that his main theme was "The progress of humane-

ness in the human being, the triumph of humaneness over inhumanity." And this theme was most strikingly embodied in the books he wrote during the Second World War. As a war correspondent Platonov often went to the front lines and displayed remarkable fortitude and courage. He directed the whole of his life-asserting, optimistic talent against the anti-human essence of fascism. In his article about Karel Čapek's novel "War with the Newts" Platonov appealed to writers everywhere in the world to "smash with their steel satirical pens the dumb head of the madman and show the future as a vast space only temporarily covered with the shadow of the current, albeit the most ruthless enemy of mankind—fascism."

After the war, Platonov was one of the first writers to speak of those spiritual war-wounds which would take much longer to heal than physical wounds. But even in the stories written during this period Platonov remained his optimistic self, always hoping that in the long run there would be more good than bad in man.

*THE HOMECOMING**

Alexei Alexeyevich Ivanov, a sergeant in the Guards, had been demobilized from the army. In the unit where he had served all through the war they saw him off, as was only right and proper, with regret, affection, music and wine. His close friends and comrades went with him to the station, said their final farewells and left. But the train was several long hours behind schedule, and after these hours had passed there was a further delay. The cold autumn night began to fall. The station building had been destroyed in the war and there was nowhere to spend the night, so Ivanov hitched a lift back to the unit. The next day they saw him off again, singing songs and embracing the departing sergeant as a token of their eternal friendship, but this time they expressed their feelings more briefly and only his closest friends were present.

Ivanov set off for the station a second time. There he was told that the train had still not arrived and he might just as well go back to the unit for the night. But not wanting to go through the awkward business of saying good-bye yet a third time and bothering his comrades, Ivanov stayed waiting miserably on the deserted asphalt of the platform.

By the main points there was an undamaged duty-box, and on a bench near the box sat a woman in a quilted jacket and a warm scarf. She had been sitting there with her things yesterday and was still there now waiting for the train. As he was leaving yesterday to spend the night at the unit, Ivanov had thought of asking this lonely woman to come and stay with the nurses in their warm wooden house.

Why should she be cold all night? There was no knowing whether she could keep warm in the duty-box. But while he was thinking, the car set off and Ivanov forgot about the woman.

Now this woman was sitting, motionless as before, in the same spot as yesterday. This constancy and patience bespoke a woman's faithful and unchanging heart, at least in relation to her possessions and home, to which this woman was probably returning. Ivanov went up to her: perhaps she, too, would prefer his company to being alone.

The woman turned her face to Ivanov and he recognized her. It was the girl they called "Masha, the bath attendant's daughter", because she had once called herself it, and really was the daughter of a man who worked in the steam baths. Ivanov had come across her once or twice at the air base service battalion where this Masha, the bath attendant's daughter, worked as a civilian volunteer helping the cook in the canteen.

The autumn landscape surrounding them was forlorn and sad at this time of day. The train that was supposed to take Masha and Ivanov home was somewhere out there in the grey expanse. The only thing that could possibly comfort and cheer a person's heart was the heart of another person.

Ivanov chatted to Masha and began to feel better. She was a comely lass, simple and kind with her big worker's hands and her healthy young body. She was also on her way home, wondering how she would live her new civilian life. She had got used to the girls at the aerodrome and the pilots, who loved her like their elder sister, gave her chocolate and called her "Ample Masha" because of her size and her big heart, which embraced all her brothers in one love, like real sisters always do, never just one of them. It was strange, even frightening to be going home to her relatives who seemed like strangers now.

Ivanov and Masha felt orphaned without the army. But Ivanov could never stay sad or despondent for long. He always felt that someone far away was laughing at him and being happy instead of him, while he was just moping like a silly fool. So Ivanov always got down to the business of living, that is, found himself some form of activity or

comfort, or, as he put it, something nice and handy, and this cured his depression. He moved closer to Masha and asked her to let him give her a comradely kiss on the cheek.

"Just a little one," he said. "The train's late and it's miserable waiting for it."

"Only because the train's late?" asked Masha, gazing at his face alertly.

The ex-sergeant looked about thirty-five. The skin on his face was brown from being beaten by the wind and burnt by the sun, the grey eyes watching Masha were timid, almost shy, and his speech, although direct, was courteous and kind. Masha liked his hollow, hoarse voice of an elderly man and his dark, coarse face with its look of strength and defencelessness. Ivanov put out his pipe with his thumb that did not feel the smouldering heat, and sighed as he waited for permission. Masha moved away from him slightly. He smelt strongly of tobacco, fried bread and a little wine—those clean things that come from fire or kindle it themselves. It was as if Ivanov lived on nothing but tobacco, rusks, beer and wine. He repeated his request.

"I'll be careful, just a little kiss, Masha. Imagine I'm your uncle."

"I've already imagined—that you're my father, not my uncle."

"I see. So it's all right, is it?"

"Fathers don't need to ask," laughed Masha.

Later Ivanov confessed to himself that Masha's hair smelled like fallen autumn leaves in the forest, and he would never be able to forget it.

Going a little way from the track, he lit a small fire to fry some eggs for his and Masha's supper.

The train arrived in the night and carried them off in the direction of home. For two days they travelled together, then on the third day Masha arrived at the town where she had been born twenty years ago. She gathered her things together and asked Ivanov to fix the bundle comfortably on her back, but Ivanov hoisted it onto his own shoulders and got out of the carriage after her, although he was still more than a day's journey from home.

Masha was surprised and touched by his considerateness. She was afraid of suddenly being left alone in the town

where she had been born and grown up, but which was now almost like a foreign land to her. Her mother and father had been driven into captivity by the Germans and had died in unknown circumstances. All Masha had left now was a cousin and two aunts, for whom she felt no real affection.

Ivanov arranged with the station-master to make a stop-over, and stayed with Masha. He should really have gone straight home to where his wife and two children, whom he had not seen for four years, were waiting for him. But he put off the joyful, anxious moment of meeting his family—why, he did not know. Perhaps because he wanted to enjoy his freedom a little longer.

Masha did not know whether Ivanov had a family and girlish shyness prevented her from asking him. She simply trusted him out of the goodness of her heart, with no thought for anything else.

Two days later Ivanov set off again on his journey home and Masha came to the station with him. He kissed her as a matter of course and promised to remember her forever.

In reply she smiled and said:

"Why remember me forever? There's no need, and anyway you're bound to forget. I don't ask anything of you. Just forget me."

"Dear Masha... Where were you before? Why didn't we meet a long, long time ago?"

"Before the war I was at school, and a long, long time ago I wasn't even born."

The train arrived and they said goodbye. Ivanov went off and did not see the solitary Masha burst into tears because she could never forget anyone: not her girlfriends, or the comrades with whom fate had once brought her together. Ivanov looked through the window at the small houses of the town he was never likely to see again, thinking that in another town his wife Lyuba and children Petka and Nastya lived in a little house like these, and that they were waiting for him. He had sent his wife a telegram from the unit saying he was on his way home and longing to kiss her and the children as soon as possible.

Lyubov Vassilievna, Ivanov's wife, had met each train from the west for three days. She had got time off work,

hadn't fulfilled her work quota, and could not sleep at night for joy, listening to the slow, indifferent swing of the pendulum on the wall clock. On the fourth day she sent the children, Petrushka and Nastya, to the station to meet their father if he arrived in the afternoon, and went again herself for the night train.

Ivanov arrived on the sixth day. He was met by his son. Petrushka was now eleven, and at first the father did not recognize this serious young lad who looked older than his years. What he saw was a skinny boy, small for his age, but with a big head, a broad forehead and a calm face that already seemed used to care and worry, while the small, brown eyes looked out on the world darkly and discontentedly as if they saw nothing but disorder everywhere. The boy was neatly dressed. His boots were worn but still wearable, and his trousers and jacket were old, made from his father's civilian clothes, but without any holes. They had been darned here and patched there, and all in all Petrushka looked like a small, poor, but industrious peasant. His father was surprised and sighed.

"Are you father, then?" asked Petrushka, after Ivanov put his arms round him, kissed him and drew him close. "You must be."

"Yes. Hello, Pyotr Alexeyevich! "

"Hello. Why're you so late? We've been waiting for days."

"It was the train, Petrushka, a slow one. How're your mother and Nastya, fit and well?"

"Not bad," said Petrushka. "How many orders have you got?"

"Two, Petrushka, and three medals."

"Mother and I thought you'd be covered with them. Mother's got two medals as well, for helping with the war effort. Why've you got so few things—only one bag?"

"That's all I need."

"I suppose it's hard to fight if you've got a big trunk?" asked the boy.

"Yes, it's easier with a bag," said his father. "You don't find anyone there with a trunk."

"I thought they'd all have them. I'd keep my things in a trunk—they only get broken and crumpled in a bag."

He took his father's bag and set off home, with the father following him.

The mother met them on the porch; she had asked to be let off work again, as if her heart had told her that her husband would come today. She went home first from the factory before going to the station. She was afraid Semyon Yevseyevich might have come round: he liked dropping in occasionally in the afternoon; he would turn up in the middle of the day and sit with five-year-old Nastya and Petrushka. But he never came empty-handed. Always brought something for the children, a sweet, some sugar, a roll of white bread, or a coupon for something they needed at the shop. Lyubov Vassilievna had never had any cause to complain about Semyon Yevseyevich: in the two years they had known each other, he had been very kind to her, and he treated the children as if he were their own father, even more considerately than a father. But today she didn't want her husband to see Semyon Yevseyevich. She tidied the kitchen and their room—it must all be clean without anything that didn't belong there. And later on, tomorrow or the day after, she would tell her husband the whole truth. Luckily Semyon Yevseyevich hadn't turned up today.

Ivanov walked up to his wife, put his arms round her and stood like that, not letting her go, feeling the forgotten yet familiar warmth of the woman he loved.

Little Nastya came out of the house and seeing her father whom she did not remember caught hold of his leg and tried to push him away from her mother, then burst out crying. Petrushka, who was standing silently by his father and mother with the bag on his shoulders, waited a moment and then said:

"That's enough, you two. Nastya's crying, she doesn't understand."

The father let go of his wife and picked up Nastya who was crying with fright.

"Nastya," Petrushka called to her. "Stop that, I tell you. It's our father, he's one of the family! "

Inside Ivanov had a wash and sat down at the table. He stretched out his legs, closed his eyes and a feeling of quiet joy and calm contentment came over him. The war had

ended. His legs had tramped thousands of miles in those years, his face was lined with fatigue, and his eyes ached beneath their closed lids—they wanted to rest now in dusk or darkness.

While he sat there the whole family got busy in the living room and kitchen preparing a special meal to celebrate his homecoming. Ivanov looked at all the things in the room one by one: the clock, the dresser, the thermometer on the wall, the chairs, the flowers on the window-sill, the Russian kitchen stove. They had lived here without him, missing him, for a long time. Now he had come back and he looked at them, getting to know them again, as if they were relatives who had been living a lonely, poor life without him. He breathed in the old, familiar scent of home: rotting wood, his children's warm bodies, the smell of burning from the stove. The smell was the same as it had been four years ago. It had not drifted away or changed in his absence. Ivanov had never found it anywhere else, although he had been in hundreds of dwellings in different countries during the war. They all had their own odour, but it was different from his native home. Ivanov could still remember the scent of Masha, the scent of her hair; but it had smelt of forest leaves, an unfamiliar overgrown path, a life of fresh disquiet, not home. What was she doing now, Masha, the bath attendant's daughter, and how was she settling down to civilian life? Well, the best of luck to her...

Ivanov could see that Petrushka was the most active person about the house. As well as working himself, he gave instructions to his mother and Nastya about what to do and what not to do and how to do things properly. Nastya obediently did what Petrushka said and was no longer afraid of her father as a strange man. She had the lively concentrated face of a child who does everything in life properly and seriously, and she was obviously sweet-natured because she never resented Petrushka.

"Clear the potato peelings out of that pot, Nastya, I need it."

Nastya obediently emptied the pot and washed it. Meanwhile the mother was hastily making a cake from dough without yeast to put in the stove which Petrushka had already lit.

"Get a move on, Mum! Hurry up!" Petrushka ordered. "You can see I've got the stove going. You're used to taking it easy, you old Stakhanovite."

"Won't be a minute, Petrushka," said his mother obediently. "I'll just put some raisins in, then it'll be ready. It must be quite a while since your father had raisins. I've been saving them up for a long time."

"He's had raisins, alright," said Petrushka. "Our soldiers get raisins, alright. They're well off for grub—just look at their fat faces. And why might you be sitting down, Nastya? Think you've come to tea or something? Peel some potatoes and we'll fry them up for supper. Can't feed a family on nothing but cake!"

While his mother was making the cake, Petrushka put an iron pot of cabbage soup into the stove with a big pair of tongs so as not to waste the fire, and proceeded to give orders to the fire itself:

"What are you burning all over the place like that for? Let's have a nice straight flame right under the food. Do you think the trees in the forest grew this wood for nothing? Nastya, why did you shove the kindling in the stove any old how? You should have laid it properly like I showed you. And why are you peeling half the potato away again? It's a waste of good food to cut the best part away. That's the last time I tell you. Next time you'll get what-for."

"What's the matter, Petrushka, ticking off Nastya all the time?" his mother said gently. "Leave her alone. How can she peel all those potatoes, if you keep going on about shaving them thin like a barber so nothing's wasted. Your father's just come home and all you can do is grumble!"

"I'm not grumbling. Just making sure everything's alright. Dad needs to be fed, he's just got back from the war and you're wasting good food. Think how much food we lose in a year from potato peelings. If we had a pig we could feed it for a whole year on nothing but potato peel and send it to a pig-show, and it'd win a medal there. Just think of that, but you don't care."

Ivanov didn't know his son had grown up to be like this, and now he sat there marvelling at the lad's astuteness. But he preferred the gentle little Nastya, whose small hands were also busy with the housework and had already grown

quick and deft. She must be used to working around the house.

"Why don't you talk to me, Lyuba?" he asked his wife. "Tell me how you got on when I was away, how you're keeping and what sort of work you're doing."

Lyubov Vassilievna was as shy of her husband now as a young bride. She wasn't used to him anymore. She even blushed when he talked to her, and her face took on that timid, frightened expression that Ivanov had found so pleasing when she was a young woman.

"We managed, Alyosha. It wasn't too bad. The children weren't ill very often and I managed to bring them up. The trouble is I'm only home with them at night. I work at the brick place now, on a press, and it's a long walk from here..."

"Where are you working?" Ivanov hadn't understood.

"At the brick factory, on a press. I didn't have any training so I did odd jobs at first, then they taught me and put me on the press. It's good to be working, but the children are on their own all the time. See how they've turned out? Do everything themselves, just like grown-ups," said Lyubov Vassilievna quietly. "I don't know whether that's good or bad, Alyosha..."

"We'll see about all that, Lyuba. Now we'll all be together again. There's plenty of time to work out what's good and bad..."

"Everything'll be better now you're back. On my own I don't know what's right or wrong, and I used to get frightened. Now you must think how we should bring the children up..."

Ivanov got up and paced around the room.

"So you didn't have such a bad time on the whole, eh?"

"Not too bad, Alyosha. We stuck it out somehow and it's all over now. But we missed you so much. It was terrible to think you might be killed out there like the others and never come back again..."

She began crying over the cake which was already in a baking tin, and her tears fell into the dough. She had just brushed the top with egg and went on smoothing the dough with the palm of her hand, greasing the celebration cake with her tears.

Nastya clasped her mother's leg and pressed her face against her skirt, staring up at her father sternly.

He bent down towards her.

"What's the matter, Nastya, my love. Are you angry with me?"

He picked her up in his arms and stroked her small head.

"Eh, lass, you've quite forgotten me. You were only a little mite when I went off to the army..."

Nastya put her head on his shoulder and began to cry too.

"What's up, my love?"

"Mummy's crying, so I'm going to as well."

Petrushka, who had been standing bewildered in front of the stove, did not approve of this.

"What's the matter with all of you? While you're blubbering, the heat in the stove's being wasted. And if we stoke it up, who'll give us coupons for some new wood? We've nearly used up the last lot, except for a bit in the barn—about ten logs and that's only aspen. Give us the dough, mother, while there's still some heat left."

Petrushka took the large iron pot of cabbage soup out of the stove and raked the glowing embers in the hearth, while Lyubov Vassilievna hurriedly thrust two cake-tins into the stove as if to pacify Petrushka, forgetting to brush the second with egg.

Ivanov's home felt strange to him and he still couldn't quite understand it. His wife was just the same, with her sweet, shy face, although it was drawn and tired now, and the children were his own, except that they had grown while he had been away in the army, which was only to be expected. But something was stopping Ivanov from feeling the full joy of his homecoming. Perhaps he was simply not used to family life anymore and could not quite understand even his nearest and dearest. He watched Petrushka, his grown-up first-born, listened to him giving orders and instructions to his mother and little sister, saw his serious, worried face and was ashamed to admit that he did not feel enough paternal warmth for the lad, did not feel drawn to him as a father should to his son. He was even more ashamed of this indifference towards Petrushka, since he realized that the boy needed love and care more than the

others, because he looked so sad. Ivanov did not know exactly how his family had lived without him and he could not understand properly, not yet, why Petrushka had got like that.

Sitting at the table in the family circle Ivanov suddenly realized what his duty was. He must get down to business as quickly as possible, find a job to earn money and help his wife bring up their children properly—then things would gradually get better and Petrushka would go out to play with the other lads or read a book, instead of barking orders with a pair of tongs by the kitchen stove.

Petrushka ate less than anyone else, but scooped up all the crumbs and gobbled them down.

"What are you picking up crumbs for, Petrushka, when you haven't finished your slice of cake?" said his father. "Eat it up and your mother will give you another one."

"You can eat house and home, but I've had enough," said Petrushka frowning.

"He's afraid that if he starts to eat a lot, Nastya will too," said Lyubov Vassilievna simply. "And that worries him."

"Nothing worries you lot," said Petrushka calmly. "I only want to make sure there's more for you."

The father and mother exchanged glances and shuddered at their son's words.

"Why don't *you* eat?" the father asked little Nastya. "You copy Petrushka, do you? You'll have to eat properly, if you want to be a big girl."

"I am a big girl," said Nastya.

She ate one small piece of cake and set aside another slightly larger one, covering it with a napkin.

"Why are you doing that?" asked her mother. "Would you like me to put some butter on it?"

"No, I'm full."

"Well, eat it like that, then. Why have you put it away?"

"Uncle Semyon will be coming. I'm saving it for him. It's not yours. It's mine and I haven't eaten it. I'll put it under a pillow so it doesn't get cold..."

Nastya got down from the table, carried the slice of cake wrapped in a napkin over to the bed, and put it under a pillow.

Her mother remembered putting pillows over a cake

she had made for the First of May celebrations, so it would not get cold before Semyon Yevseyevich came.

"Who's this Uncle Semyon then?" Ivanov asked his wife.

Lyubov Vassilievna did not know what to say and said:

"I don't know who he is... He comes to see the children. His wife and children were killed by the Germans. He's got fond of our children and comes to play with them."

"Play with them?" said Ivanov disbelievingly. "What do they play here? How old is he?"

Petrushka glanced swiftly at his mother and father. His mother did not reply and only looked sadly at Nastya, but his father gave a hard smile, got up from the table and lit a cigarette.

"Where are the toys you and this Uncle Semyon play with?" the father asked Petrushka.

Nastya got down from the chair, clambered onto another one by the chest of drawers, took out some books and brought them to her father.

"They're toy books," she said to him. "Uncle Semyon reads them out loud to me: 'Here's a funny bear, just look! He's a toy and he's a book'..."

Ivanov took the toy books that his daughter handed him: about Misha the Bear, the toy cannon and the cottage where Grandma Domna lived and spun flax with her granddaughter...

Petrushka remembered it was time to close the damper in the stove-pipe so the heat did not escape.

When he had closed it, he said to his father:

"He's older than you—Semyon Yevseyevich. He helps us out. Leave him alone."

Glancing out of the window just in case, Petrushka saw the clouds in the sky were the wrong ones for September.

"Take a look at them clouds. They're the colour of lead. Looks as if we'll have snow! Surely it can't be winter already? What'll we do? The potatoes haven't been dug up yet and we haven't got any fodder in for the winter! A right mess! "

Ivanov looked at his son, listened to his words and felt shy of him. He wanted to ask his wife exactly who this Semyon Yevseyevich was who had been visiting his family

for two years now, and who it was he came to see—Nastya or his comely wife—but Petrushka was distracting Lyubov Vassilievna with household problems:

“Give me the bread cards for tomorrow, mother, and the coupons. And the kerosene coupons—tomorrow’s the last day. We need charcoal, too, and you lost the sack, and they won’t provide one. Have a good look for the sack or make a new one. We can’t manage without a sack. And let’s get Nastya to stop people taking water from our well tomorrow, or there won’t be any left. Winter’s coming and the water level drops, but our rope’s not long enough to lower the bucket, and we don’t want to eat snow instead—we’d need firewood to melt it...”

While he was saying all this, Petrushka swept the floor by the stove and tidied the kitchen utensils. Then he took the bowl of cabbage soup out of the oven.

“You’ve had your cake, now it’s time for cabbage soup and bread,” he ordered everyone. “And tomorrow morning you’d better go along to the District Soviet and Military Commissariat, father, and sign on so we can get coupons for you.”

“Alright, lad,” said his father meekly.

“Be sure to go. Mind you don’t oversleep and forget about it.”

“I won’t forget,” promised his father.

The family ate its first meal together after the war, cabbage soup with meat, in silence, even Petrushka sat quietly. It was as if father, mother and children were afraid of destroying, with a chance word, the quiet happiness of a family sitting together.

Then Ivanov asked his wife:

“How are you all off for clothes, Lyuba? Could probably do with some new things, couldn’t you?”

“We made do with the old ones, but now we’ll see about getting something new,” smiled Lyubov Vassilievna. “I mended what the children already had, then used your suit, two pairs of trousers and all your underwear to make things for them. We were very hard up, you see, and I had to clothe the children somehow.”

“You were right,” said Ivanov. “Never begrudge the children anything.”

"I didn't. I sold the coat you bought me and I wear a quilted jacket now."

"It's too short for her. She could easily catch cold," Petrushka commented. "I'm going to work as a stoker at the steam baths and get her a coat with my wages. They sell them in the market. I went along to see how much they cost and some aren't too expensive..."

"We'll manage without you and your wages," said the father.

After dinner Nastya put on a big pair of glasses and sat down by the window to mend the gloves which her mother now wore under her mittens at work—it was autumn and the weather had turned cold. Petrushka got angry when he saw her:

"Why are you ruining your eyesight with Uncle Semyon's glasses?"

"I'm looking over the top, not through them."

"I can see what you're doing alright! You'll ruin your eyesight and go blind, then you'll be a dependant for the rest of your life and live on a pension. Take them off at once. And stop darning the gloves. Mother'll do them herself, or I will when I have a moment. Get out your exercise book and practise your strokes. Goodness knows how long it is since you last practised."

"Does Nastya go to school, then?" asked the father.

The mother said she wasn't old enough for school yet but Petrushka made her do lessons every day. He had bought her an exercise book and she practised writing now. Petrushka was also teaching her to count with melon seeds and Lyubov Vassilievna was teaching her to read.

Nastya put down the mitten and took her exercise book and pen-holder out of the chest of drawers. Pleased that everything was being done properly, Petrushka put on his mother's quilted jacket and went into the yard to chop firewood for the next day. He usually brought the chopped logs inside at night and piled them behind the stove so they would dry out and burn more hotly and economically.

In the evening Lyubov Vassilievna made supper early. She wanted to get the children to sleep so she could sit and have a talk with her husband. But after supper it was a long time before the children dropped off; Nastya lay

on the wooden divan peeping out from under the blanket for a long time at her father, and Petrushka lay on the shelf of the Russian stove where he always slept, summer and winter, tossing and turning, coughing and muttering something, unable to settle down. But then night came, Nastya closed her tired eyes and Petrushka began to snore on the stove.

Petrushka slept lightly, always on the alert: he was always afraid something would happen at night and he wouldn't hear it—a fire, or thieves breaking in or mother might forget to latch the door and it would swing open in the night letting all the warmth out. That night he was woken by the troubled voices of his parents talking in the room next to the kitchen. It could have been midnight or nearly daybreak for all he knew, but his mother and father were not asleep.

"Don't make a noise, Alyosha, or the children will wake up," said the mother quietly. "And don't say bad things about him. He's a good person and he loved your children..."

"We don't need his love," said the father. "I love my children myself... Fancy loving other people's children. I sent you money regularly and you had a job—why did you need this Semyon Yevseyevich? Still got the itch, eh? Oh Lyuba, Lyuba! I never thought you'd do a thing like that while I was away. So you've been making a fool of me..."

He stopped talking and struck a match to light his pipe.

"How can you say such a thing, Alyosha!" the mother exclaimed loudly. "I looked after the children, they were hardly ever ill, they've grown up fit and strong..."

"So what!" said the father. "Some women were left with four children and managed alright and the kids grew up as well as ours. And just look at Petrushka now—talks like an old man, but he's probably forgotten how to read."

Petrushka sighed on the stove and pretended to snore so he could go on listening. "Alright," he thought, "so I'm like an old man, but you didn't have to worry about grub out there."

"Yes, but he's learnt about the most difficult and important things in life," said the mother. "And he's not behind with his lessons either."

"Just who is he, this Semyon of yours? Stop trying to

talk me round," said the father angrily.

"He's a good person."

"Do you love him then?"

"Alyosha, I'm the mother of your children..."

"So what? Give me a straight answer! "

"I love you, Alyosha. I'm a mother. It's a long time since I was a woman, I've even forgotten when, and that was only with you."

The father said nothing and smoked his pipe in the darkness.

"I missed you, Alyosha. Of course I had the children, but they couldn't take your place. I waited and waited for you all those long, terrible years. I didn't even want to wake up of a morning."

"What's his job? Where does he work?"

"He works in the supplies department at our factory."

"I see. He's a crook."

"No, he's not. I don't know... His whole family was killed in Mogilyov, there were three children, the daughter was already grown up."

"Never mind, he soon found himself a new, ready-made family instead and a woman who's still young and not bad to look at, so he's done alright."

The mother did not reply. Silence followed, but soon Petrushka heard her crying.

"He used to tell the children about you, Alyosha," she began, and Petrushka knew there were big tears welling in her eyes. "He told them how you were fighting out there for us and what you were going through... They used to ask him why and he told them it was because you were a good person..."

The father laughed and knocked the ash out of his pipe.

"So that's the sort he is, this Semyon of yours. Never even seen me, but thinks I'm a good bloke."

"He's never seen you, but he made it up just so the children would love you and not forget you."

"Why should he do that? To get round you? You just tell me what he wanted."

"Perhaps he's got a good heart, Alyosha, and that's why he does it. Why shouldn't he?"

"Don't mind my saying it, but you're a fool to believe

that, Lyuba. Everyone's after something."

"But Semyon Yevseyevich often brought things for the children. He always came with sweets, or white flour, or sugar, and not long ago he brought Nastya a pair of felt boots, but they were no good—too small. And he never asked for anything from us. We didn't need anything either, Alyosha. We could have managed on our own, we were used to it. But he said he felt better when he was caring for other people, it helped him not to grieve so much for his dead family. You'll see him. It's not the way you think it is."

"That's all a load of rubbish," said the father. "Don't try to fool me. I'm fed up with you, Lyuba. I want to enjoy life."

"Enjoy it with us, Alyosha."

"Me with you, and you with Semyon?"

"No more, Alyosha. He won't ever come here again. I'll tell him not to."

"No more must mean there has been something. Eh, Lyuba, you women are all alike."

"And what about you men?" she asked bitterly. "What do you mean, we women are all alike? I'm not like that. I worked day and night. We were making fire bricks for railway engines. I got so thin in the face you could hardly recognize me. A beggar wouldn't have asked me for a farthing. Things were hard for me, too, and the children were at home with no one to look after them. I got back after work with the stove unlit, the supper to cook, and the children all alone in the dark. They couldn't help round the house like they do now. Petrushka was little in those days. Then Semyon Yevseyevich began to drop in. He came and sat with the children. He lived all on his own, you see. 'Mind if I come round and have a warm-up at your place?' he asked me. I told him our place was cold too and the firewood was damp, but he said, 'Never mind, it's my heart that's chilled to the core. Just let me sit with your children for a bit—you don't need to light the stove for me.' So I said alright, he could come, the children wouldn't be so frightened if he was there. Then I got used to him as well and we all felt better when he came. I'd look at him and remember you, that we had you. It was so sad and hard

without you. I was glad for anyone to come, so it wouldn't be so miserable and the time would go more quickly. We had no use for time when you weren't with us."

"Go on, what else?" the father urged her.

"There's nothing else. You're home now, Alyosha."

"Well, in that case everything's alright," said the father. "It's time for bed."

"Wait a bit," the mother said. "Let's talk some more. I'm so happy with you."

"Why don't they shut up and go to sleep?" thought Petrushka on the stove. "They've made up and that's that. Mother's got to get up early for work tomorrow, but she's having herself a holiday now that she's stopped crying."

"Did this Semyon love you?" the father asked.

"Wait a minute, I'll just go and tuck up Nastya. She throws off the blanket in her sleep and gets frozen."

She drew the blanket over Nastya, went into the kitchen and stood listening for a moment by the stove to see if Petrushka was asleep. Petrushka realized this and began to snore. Then she went out and he heard her voice again.

"I suppose so. I used to catch a soft look in his eyes, and I'm not much to look at now, am I? He's had a hard time, Alyosha, he needed someone to love."

"You might at least have given him a kiss, if that's the way things were," said the father good-naturedly.

"Well, I never! He did kiss me twice, though I didn't want him to."

"Why did he do that, if you didn't want him to?"

"I don't know. He said he'd forgotten himself and remembered his wife, and I was a bit like her."

"Is he a bit like me?"

"No. There's nobody like you. There's only one Alyosha."

"Only one, eh? That's how it always begins—first one, then two."

"He only kissed me on the cheek, not the lips."

"Makes no difference where."

"Yes, it does, Alyosha. You don't know what things were like for us."

"What do you mean? I fought all through the war and was closer to death than I am to you now..."

"You fought and I was dying for you here. My hands

shook with unhappiness, but I had to work cheerfully to feed the children and help the country fight the fascists."

She was speaking calmly, but her heart was heavy, and Petrushka felt sorry for his mother: he knew she had learnt how to mend their shoes so as not to pay good money to the cobbler, and she had repaired people's electric fires in return for potatoes.

"I couldn't go on living like that, breaking my heart all the time," she said. "If I had, it would have been the end of me. I would have died, I know, but I had the children to think of... I needed to feel something else, Alyosha, some sort of happiness, so I could relax. There was a man who said he loved me and was as tender with me as you were once a long time ago..."

"Who's that? Semyon again?" the father asked.

"No, someone else. He's the regional committee instructor in our trade union. He was evacuated here."

"To hell with him, whoever he is! So what happened? Did he make you happy?"

Petrushka did not know anything about the instructor and was surprised that he did not know him. "So our mother's been up to a spot of mischief too, fancy that," he muttered to himself.

She answered her husband's question.

"I didn't get anything from him, no happiness at all, and I felt even worse afterwards. My heart reached out to him because it was dying, but when we got close, really close, I felt nothing. At that moment I thought about things to be done in the house and was sorry I had let him be close. I realized that I could only have peace and happiness with you and I would only rest when you were with me again. I can't go on without you. I wouldn't be any good for the children. Stay with us, Alyosha. We'll have a good life!"

Petrushka heard his father get out of bed without a word, light his pipe and sit down on a stool.

"How many times were you really close to him?" he asked.

"Only once," the mother replied. "It never happened again. Isn't that enough?"

"That's your business," the father remarked. "But why did you say you're the mother of our children and

you'd only been a woman with me, a long time ago?.."

"It's true, Alyosha..."

"How can it be true? You were a woman with him as well, weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't. I wanted to be, but I couldn't. I felt I couldn't go on without you. I needed to be with someone. I was so worn out, everything seemed so hopeless, that I couldn't even love my children and you know I'd put up with anything for them."

"Just a minute!" said the father. "You say you made a mistake with this new Semyon of yours and didn't find any happiness with him, yet you managed to go on and you're still in one piece?"

"Yes, I managed to go on," she whispered. "I'm still alive."

"So you're lying to me about that as well. How can you talk about telling me the truth?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "I don't know anything."

"Well I do. I know a lot. I've been through more than you have," the father said. "You're a whore, that's what you are."

The mother was silent. You could hear the father's heavy, fast breathing.

"So I've come home," he said. "The war's over and now you've wounded me in the heart. Well, go and live with your Semyons. You've made a laughing-stock of me, but I'm flesh and blood, too, not just a plaything."

He began to get dressed in the dark, then lit the kerosene lamp, sat down at the table and wound the watch on his wrist.

"Four o'clock," he said to himself. "Still dark. It's true what they say, that there are lots of wenches but no true wife."

It was quiet in the house. Nastya was breathing evenly asleep on the wooden divan. Petrushka snuggled up against the pillow on the warm stove and forgot that he should be snoring.

"Alyosha!" said the mother lovingly. "Alyosha, forgive me."

Petrushka heard his father grunt, then there was the sound of breaking glass. Through the chinks in the curtain he saw it had got darker in the room where his father and mother were, but there was still a light burning. "He's

broken the lamp glass," thought Petrushka. "You can't get them anywhere."

"You've cut your hand," said the mother. "It's bleeding. Get a towel from the chest of drawers."

"Shut up! " he shouted at her. "I can't stand the sound of your voice... Wake up the children. Wake them up at once, I tell you. I'll let them know what sort of mother they've got! "

Nastya gave a frightened scream and woke up.

"Mother! " she cried. "Can I come into your bed?"

She liked creeping into her mother's bed at night and snuggling up against her warm body under the blanket.

Petrushka sat up, his legs dangling over the edge of the stove, and said to everyone:

"It's time you were asleep. Why have you woken me up? It's not morning yet. It's still dark outside. Why are you making such a noise, with the light on too?"

"Go back to sleep, Nastya, it's early yet. I'll come and tuck you up in a minute," his mother replied. "And you lie down and stop talking, Petrushka."

"Why are you talking then? What does father want?" said Petrushka.

"What's it got to do with you, what I want! " his father retorted. "Regular little sergeant-major, you are."

"Why did you go and break the lamp glass? What are you frightening mother for? She's thin enough as it is. Eats her potatoes without butter and gives it to Nastya instead."

"Do you know what your mother got up to here?" cried the father plaintively, like a little boy.

"Alyosha! " Lyubov Vassilievna beseeched her husband.

"Yes, I do, I know everything," Petrushka said. "She cried for you and waited for you, but now you're back and she's still crying. You're the one who doesn't know! "

"You don't understand a thing yet! " shouted his father angrily. "Look what a son we've got."

"I understand everything inside-out," Petrushka answered from the stove. "You're the one that doesn't understand. We've got work to do. We've got to go on living, and all you two can do is quarrel like daft things."

Petrushka broke off, lay down on his pillow and began

to cry suddenly and silently.

"A fine person you are to have in charge," said the father. "Still, who cares now? You can rule the roost instead of me..."

Wiping his tears, Petrushka answered:

"What sort of a father are you, saying things like that, even though you're grown up and fought in the war... Just you go to the disabled servicemen's co-op tomorrow and take a look at Uncle Khariton. He serves behind the counter there, cutting bread, and never cheats anyone. He fought in the war as well and came back. Go and ask him. He's always talking and joking. I've heard him myself. His wife Anyuta learnt to drive and now she delivers the bread. She's a good woman—never steals it. She had a friend, too, used to go to see him and get something to eat. This friend of hers had a medal, he's lost an arm and he's in charge of a shop where they sometimes have a few manufactured goods that are hard to come by."

"Stop all that talking and go to sleep. It'll soon be daylight," said the mother.

"You wouldn't let me sleep either... It won't be light for a bit. This bloke with one arm got friendly with Anyuta and that made life easier for them. Khariton was away fighting. Then one day he comes home and starts cursing Anyuta. Curses her all day long, then drinks wine and eats snacks all through the night, but Anyuta just cries and doesn't eat anything. He curses her till he's had enough of it, then stops going on at her and says: 'Fancy you just having one bloke with one arm, you silly woman. I had Glashka, Aproska, Maruska, another Anyuta, and then there was Magdalinka.' And he's a-laughing and Aunt Anyuta's a-laughing as well. And then she goes around boasting that there's still no one to beat Khariton and that he killed hundreds of fascists and the women were all crazy about him. Uncle Khariton tells us about it in the shop when he's handing out the bread ration. And now they're living together quietly and happily. But Uncle Khariton laughs and says: 'I was fooling my Anyuta. There weren't any Glashkas, Aproskas, or Anyutas, not even a Magdalinka. A soldier's job is to serve his country. He spends his time fighting the enemy, not mucking about.

I just wanted to give Anyuta a fright.' Go to bed, father, and put out the light. It's smoking without the glass..."

Ivanov listened in amazement to the story his Petrushka was telling. "The little beggar!" he thought to himself. "I expected him to come out at any moment with something about my Masha..."

Petrushka fell asleep at once and began to snore—this time he was not pretending.

It was broad daylight when he woke up and he immediately started worrying because he had slept too long and not done anything around the house yet.

The only person at home was Nastya. She was sitting on the floor looking through a picture book that her mother had bought her a long time ago. She looked at it every day because it was the only book she had, and traced the letters with her finger as if she were reading.

"What are you doing with your book so early in the morning, messing it about? Put it back where it belongs!" Petrushka said to his sister. "Where's mother? Gone to work?"

"Yes," said Nastya quietly and closed the book.

"What about father?" Petrushka looked for him round the house, in the kitchen and the living-room. "Has he taken his bag?"

"Yes," said Nastya.

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. He kissed me on the eyes and mouth."

"Did he then?" said Petrushka thoughtfully. "Get up off the floor," he ordered her. "I'll wash and dress you, then we'll go out together."

At that moment their father was sitting in the railway station. He had already drunk a big glass of vodka and had a hot meal on a voucher in the station buffet. Last night he had decided to go to the town where he had left Masha and see her, perhaps never to leave her again. It was a pity that he was much older than the bath attendant's daughter with the hair that smelt of autumn leaves. Still, they'd see how things worked out. You could never tell in advance. All the same he hoped Masha would at least be a bit pleased to see him again. That was all he asked. It would mean he had someone new who was close to him and also pretty, gay and kind-hearted. They'd see how it worked out.

Soon a train arrived which was travelling in the direction Ivanov had come from only yesterday evening. He picked up his bag and went on to the platform. "Masha's not expecting me," he thought. "She told me I'd forget her and we'd never see each other again, but here I am going back to her forever."

He climbed into the end platform of the carriage and stood there, so as to have a last look when the train moved off at the small town where he had lived before the war and where his children had been born... He wanted to look once more at the house he had left; you could see it from the train because the street it was in ran up to the level crossing which the train would pass.

The train moved off and slid quietly over the station points into the empty autumn fields. Ivanov grabbed hold of the rails by the door and looked out at the small houses, buildings, barns and fire-tower of what had been his native town. He recognized two tall chimneys in the distance: the soap works and the brick factory where Lyuba was working her press. Let her go her own way now, and he would go his. Perhaps he could have forgiven her, but what would be the good of it? His heart had hardened against her and had no forgiveness for a person who had kissed and been close to another, just so that the war and the separation from her husband did not make her feel so lonely and miserable. And the fact that Lyuba had drawn close to her Semyons because life was hard, because she was tormented by need and longing, was no excuse. It simply proved her feeling. All love springs from need and longing; if people never needed anything or longed for anything, they would never fall in love.

Ivanov decided to go into the carriage to sleep, and not take a last look at the house where he had lived and left his children: why upset yourself unnecessarily? He looked ahead to see how far it was to the crossing, and there it was in front of him. At this point the railway track crossed the dirt road leading to the town; on the road were wisps of straw and hay that had fallen off carts, willow twigs and horse dung. The road was generally empty except for the two market days each week; occasionally you would see a peasant driving past on his way to town with a full cartload

of hay or returning to the village. So it was now; the village road was empty, except for two children in the distance running out of the town, along the street which joined the road. One was a little larger than the other and had taken the small one by the hand, pulling it along after him, but hurry as the small one did, trotting along fast on its little legs, it kept falling behind. So then the larger child dragged it along after him. At the last house they stopped and looked in the direction of the railway station, as if trying to decide whether to go there or not. Then they saw the passenger train on the crossing and started running along the road towards the train as if they wanted to catch it up.

The carriage in which Ivanov was standing rushed over the crossing. He picked his bag up from the floor to go inside and sleep on his berth where he would not be disturbed by other passengers. Had those two children managed to reach the last carriage or not? He leaned out and looked back.

The two children, holding hands, were still running along the road to the crossing. They both fell down together, scrambled up and set off again. Turning his face with the movement of the train in Ivanov's direction, the larger one raised his empty hand and waved it as if calling someone to come back to him. Then immediately the two of them fell down again. Ivanov noticed that the larger child had a felt boot on one foot and a rubber overshoe on the other, which was why he tripped up so often.

Ivanov closed his eyes not wishing to see or feel the pain of these tripping, exhausted children, and suddenly felt a hotness in his chest as if his heart, imprisoned and languishing inside him, had been beating slowly and pointlessly all his life and had only now beaten its way through to freedom, filling his whole being with a shuddering warmth. He suddenly had a much more precise and real knowledge of everything he had known before. Before he had felt life through a barrier of pride and selfishness, but now he had touched it with his naked heart.

From the steps of the carriage he looked again at the distant children. He knew now that they were his children—Petrushka and Nastya. They must have seen him when the

carriage was passing over the crossing, and Petrushka had called him home to their mother, but he had looked at them casually thinking about something else, and had not recognized them as his own.

Now Petrushka and Nastya were a long way behind the train, running along the sandy strip beside the track. Petrushka was still holding Nastya by the hand, dragging her after him when she could not keep up.

Ivanov threw his bag out of the carriage onto the ground, then climbed down to the bottom step and jumped off the train onto the sandy strip along which his children were running towards him.

1946

Translated by Kathleen Cook

SERGEI ANTONOV

(b. 1915)

Sergei Antonov made his literary debut in the late 1940s and immediately attracted the attention of readers and critics alike.

His father was a railway builder and took the young Antonov with him on his travels: the Volga Region, the Urals, Central Asia and south Russia... In 1940, after graduating from the Leningrad Road-Building Institute, he was called up for the army and fought throughout the war.

"After demobilization," recalls Antonov, "I was suddenly afflicted by the disease of writing again, and even more seriously than in early youth. No doubt the impulse came from the war this time. But I did not want to write about war. I longed for love and ordinary peaceful work."

One of the principal subjects of Antonov's stories is the countryside. He explained this himself as follows: "It's hard to understand why someone strictly urban should feel impelled to write about the countryside. Perhaps I learned to appreciate rural life in the

prospecting teams with which I wandered about in my student years; perhaps frequent nights spent in hospitable peasant homes during the war made their contribution. Perhaps there really are certain hereditary genes that do not allow one to forget one's native countryside (my grandfather was a peasant in what used to be the Tver Gubernia). In any case, the fields, lakes, birch-groves, the work cares of the kolkhoz, the chastushki and the cheerful banter of the young people move me now as much as when I was a young man. And I'm sure that the speech of the present-day countryside is richer and has more character than any literary language."

In the opinion of critic Eugeny Sidorov, "the main charm of Antonov's talent is in the ability to see the big in the small, truthfully and subtly to record the poetry of the people's character, the language of the people and the unsensational beauty of everyday life."

*SHCHEGLOVO STATION**

On receiving a signal from the railway crossing that the passenger train had gone through, Vasily Ivanovich, the station-master, got up from his desk.

It was 23.00 hrs. The duty room was weakly illumined by a paraffin lamp with round tin reflector. A ragged piece of paper, put on top of the smoked glass instead of a shade, had crinkled up and the smell of smouldering paper filled the room. A heavy beetle cruised slowly about under the ceiling, bumped into the loose wallpaper, then hit the calendar with its crossed-out dates and fell on to the floor.

Vasily Ivanovich threw up his peaked cap and, compressing his puffy lips, ducked his head under it. The cap's brim hit him on the top of the head and he only just managed to field it before it hit the floor. However, this didn't rattle him and he threw up the cap again, only not so high. The peak smacked him on his broad, duck-like nose.

Suddenly realizing that someone might be watching him, Vasily Ivanovich assumed a stern expression on his boyish little face and looked at the window, but he could see nothing through the black panes except his own ghostly reflection.

Still staring at the window, he put on the cap, adjusted it with both hands so that it was tilted slightly over to one side, lit his lamp and went out on to the platform.

On both sides of the tracks, the forest was murmuring monotonously and dismally invisible in the dark. The wind brought a damp smell of mushrooms. The bell at the door boomed like a sea-shell.

About ten minutes later, a bright little star crawled out

of the distance, began coming nearer, grew bigger and divided into two. Then both stars began growing, then the lower one also divided into two, there was a whistle, and, dispensing a warm, watery mist and lighting up the dark-blue, smoky air, an engine with three lamps went past, the bright squares of windows flickering after it.

The train stopped and the brakes hissed under the wagon in the ensuing silence.

Vasily Ivanovich went up to the conductress, who was holding a lamp in her hands the way a woman nurses a baby.

"Hello, Nadya," he said.

"Hello, Vasil Ivanych."

"How's things in Moscow?"

"Fine, thanks. There's a new film on: "Spring". It's funny! About two people falling in love and mistaken identity."

Her face was not visible in the dark, but Vasily Ivanovich decided not to lift his lantern. Nadya used to be cross when he shone it in her eyes. She spoke quickly, cutting her words short and missing some out, and it was possible to tell from her voice that she was smiling.

"If their feelings were real, there wouldn't be mistaken identity", commented Vasily Ivanovich. "True feelings never deceive."

"Are we late?" asked Nadya.

"You are. Twelve minutes."

"Really! It was Voronezh that wouldn't take us. Oh well, never mind. We'll make up the time. Gavril Stepanovich is driving. We'll make it up. How are things with you?"

"All right. Managing. But you see, if they'd had real feelings..."

There was a deafening whistle. Nadya climbed up the steps. The whistle went on blowing and the engine, its wheels skidding at first, moved off. Behind, in turn, moved the carriages. Squares of light glided over the boards, skipping over irregularities on the platform that were not noticeable in the daytime and jumped down one after another on to the embankment.

After seeing the train off, Vasily Ivanovich returned to the station.

He went into the big room. There was an old poster on the wall and a heavy oak settee with small holes in the back and the seat. On it, in the corner, in his usual place, sat fifteen-year-old Koska, son of the pointsman Nikifor. He had just collected the mail.

"What have you got?" asked Vasily Ivanovich.

"What have I got? Newspapers and a letter."

"Is the letter for Ionov?"

"Who else? Him."

Nearly every day Ionov, the station-master's assistant, used to receive letters in identical envelopes.

Vasily Ivanovich sighed.

"If anyone asks for me, I'm in the duty room," he said.

"Who's going to ask?" retorted Koska.

Indeed, there was no one to ask. It was sixteen kilometres to the village, they had long since gone to bed in the housing block, and there were no other people about except the pointsman Nikifor in his box at the crossing.

"Don't you argue, you're too young to argue," said Vasily Ivanovich angrily. "Give me the newspaper *Gudok*." Koska could never make out why the station-master was always angry like this after the arrival of the passenger train. Koska was clear about almost everything that happened on the station. He could change the points, light the lamp in the signal, and, in his opinion, there was absolutely no need to keep a staff of nine on the station. If he could learn to talk over the telephone, then he, Koska, and his father could run the whole thing together...

But the station-master was cunning: when Koska asked him about communications and signals, he answered artfully and incomprehensibly so as to confuse things even more and not to give his trade secrets away.

Koska rubbed one foot against the other and looked at the poster. The forest murmured monotonously outside.

"Shcheglovo here," came a drawling voice from behind the door. "Shcheglovo here. Station-master Rebrov. Number forty-four passed through at twenty-three hundred hours zero eight minutes."

Koska thought for a moment and went to the duty room. After standing there for a moment, he gripped the handle

determinedly and pushed the door open with his shoulder. Vasily Ivanovich was noting something down in the traffic log.

"And what does it say on the door?" he said, without raising his head.

Koska said nothing.

"What does it say on the door, then?"

"All right. It's not allowed, I'll go," replied Koska offensively, going to the door.

"Where are you off to? You can stand here a bit. Only keep quiet. Don't stop me concentrating."

"I'm keeping quiet anyway."

"That's right... You went mushrooming with Ionov today again, I suppose?"

"I did."

"Did you go to the hillocks beyond the lake? There were thirty-six of them growing under a pine-tree last week."

"I'll say. We went there."

"Always loafing about... Many white ones?"

Glad that his chief was in a talkative mood, Koska was about to tell him, but the bell rang and Vasily Ivanovich waved to him to be silent.

"The Department," said Vasily Ivanovich, taking off his earphones. "Talks to all stations."

"All at once?"

"All at once."

"How's that?"

"Very simple. The dispatcher has a special call-key. He turns this key and sends pulses of call-current to all the points and gives the instructions into a microphone. You follow me?"

Koska sighed.

"It's not the same as gathering mushrooms," commented his chief.

By day, one after another, goods trains each over half a kilometre long went through Shcheglovo station; there were freezers, gondolas, pullmans, wagons inscribed *fit for grain* and oil-cisterns. The trains carried coal, shining in the sun as if wet, pipes, planks, reinforcement, lorries three apiece on two flats and slabs of facing stone that looked like frozen waves.

The engine-driver's mates nimbly took the baton and the trains, so heavy that they shook the whole station, went down the main line without losing speed and sucking eddies of dust in their wake.

Vasily Ivanovich would go out to meet the goods trains, checking his uniform just as scrupulously, but not worrying too much about the set of his cap.

Three days later, at 02.10 hrs, the passenger train returned.

"Hullo, Vasily Ivanovich!" came from the darkness.

"Hullo, Nadya. Well, how's things in Rostov?"

"Fine, thanks! The house there—you remember the one I was telling you about?—it's been completely repaired. We've got a sailor travelling with us. He's a load of laughs. Tells how he fought a fascist in the water."

"Nonsense. They're humbugs, those sailors..."

"And they hitched two carriages on to us at Likhaya..."

"He's taking advantage because you don't know the sea regulations, and he makes them up."

"They're athletes going to Moscow in those carriages."

"Ask him what you're supposed to do according to regulations when the axle-boxes are on fire. He'll fake something up on the spot. They're real yarn-spinners!"

"What are you cross with him for? You've never seen the man in your life, and you're cross..." said Nadya.

"That's not the point, Nadya. I'm sorry it works out this way," Vasily Ivanovich was suddenly in a hurry—"but the train only stops for one minute, Nadya... I've got a little surprise for you but the train only stops for one minute..."

"It's time to go, Comrade Station-master," said the chief conductor proceeding to the front of the train.

"It's time. Off you go," replied Vasily Ivanovich.

The carriage jerked. Nadya was saying something but her words were inaudible because of the whistle.

Vasily Ivanovich took several steps after the train.

"Excuse me, are you the station-master?" said a voice behind him.

He looked round in astonishment. Behind him stood a little old man in a hat with floppy brim. He was carrying a suitcase.

"I am," replied Vasily Ivanovich. "Where are you from?"

"From the train, to see you."

The little old man put down his suitcase and coughed.

"Hasn't there been some mistake? This is Shcheglovo."

"Just so. Shcheglovo station." And, digging into his wallet, the old man took out an envelope. There were two papers inside it clipped together: a glossy one bearing the stamp of the railway chief, and a flimsy on which it was only possible to read by the light of the lantern the words "hereby certified" written in ink.

He read the paper in the duty room.

Station-master Rebrov was ordered to hand over his post to the newly appointed comrade (the old man raised his hat and bowed), and on the fourteenth of June to proceed to Pridonskaya marshalling yards and take over the duties of traffic controller.

"On the fourteenth," said Vasily Ivanovich with exasperation, in spite of the fact that this meant promotion. "And today is the fifteenth... So why do they bother to write?.."

All the staff helped their chief to pack in the morning and Koska noticed for the first time that his boss had a camera, a football bladder, a dog-eared copy of *How the Steel Was Tempered* and, what was altogether amazing, a duck call. Vasily Ivanovich took his leave of everybody according to seniority and left for Pridonskaya.

He did not like the new job. His work consisted of arranging the delivery of empty wagons to the coal-mine bunkers and drawing up coal-routes.

All day, nervous, shouting people banged at the little window, waved papers, and he, pressing the telephone receiver to his ear with his shoulder, signed, listened and swore.

The telephones never stopped ringing. One mine announced that the wagons were loaded, another demanded an engine. A man with the voice of an actor from 2121 said, "The coal's piling up and there's nothing to load it into. People can be taken to court for such negligence. What's your name?" It was impossible to curse him because there was no knowing who he might be.

After handing over his duties, Vasily Ivanovich would go

to his room, lie down on the bed after spreading *Gudok* under his feet and would dream about quiet little Shcheglovo station.

He remembered the clear evenings when Ionov, Koska and two or three others sat on the oak settee in the hall and the pointsman Nikifor would tell in a terrifying whisper how he had fought as a partisan during the Nazi occupation. On seeing the station-master come in, Nikifor would break off and look distractedly and enquiringly at him.

"Carry on," Vasily Ivanovich usually said, and he would proceed importantly to the duty room, although he very much wanted to listen to Nikifor.

He remembered the dark winter nights when the blizzard was sweeping the platform and the snow was blowing across the rails in gauzy ribbons, and the eyes of the wolves glittered in the forest, and Nikifor would drive them away by ringing the station bell.

He remembered the little garden with the swing and the duty office with its loose wallpaper; he remembered the conversation with Nadya, which he had never been able to bring to a conclusion...

Two weeks later he sent in a written application to be returned to his former post. The management refused.

A week later, a letter came from Koska, who wrote that everything there was the same as before; the apples were ripe; they had gone soggy, like boiled potatoes, and were "scrumptious". Koska's very letter smelt of apples.

"They've misled me," thought Vasily Ivanovich, sitting near the selector. "I could still live in Shcheglovo, build a house with two rooms and windows overlooking the garden and the branches would rub against the windowpanes, and I'd marry Nadya. She'd agree; why shouldn't she?"

He wrote another application and this time he was in luck: the old man fell ill and the job of station-master at Shcheglovo became vacant once more.

Vasily Ivanovich packed at once. No one saw him off: he had not had the chance to make friends with anyone at Pridonskaya.

He arrived at Shcheglovo on the very day when Nadya's train number forty-four was due in from Moscow.

As Koska had written, everything was indeed exactly the same as before. The yellow-painted station building looked out from behind the dusty acacia bushes and the lamp still stood on the platform, to be lit on the arrival of the passenger train; and the same settee stood in the corner of the hall.

The first to welcome the chief was Nikifor, and he was amazed to see him looking so thin and drawn. Old staff friends surrounded Vasily Ivanovich on the platform. All began persuading him to rest for two or three days, to go fishing or to stay with Nikifor's brother-in-law in the country. But he flatly turned down the fishing and the brother-in-law, warning Ionov that he would personally receive train number forty-four.

Settled in his old place, Vasily Ivanovich restored order in the duty room: he turned over the sheet of cardboard on the table and struck out each of thirty-two numbers on the calendar with a separate cross.

In the evening, Koska confided in Nikifor that the chief was not quite himself. For a whole hour he had walked about the garden pacing it out. He had then stopped dead, as if rooted to the spot, and had said to the hot water tank, "The train stops for one minute and I love you."

The passenger train pulled in at 23.15 hrs.

It was a dark night and, without stars or moon; the black sky seemed to have sunk to ground-level.

Somewhat contrary to custom, Vasily Ivanovich hurried up to the carriage.

"Well, how's things in Moscow?" he asked, even forgetting to say hello.

"What about Moscow, dear? Moscow's fine. They're planting trees in the streets."

Vasily Ivanovich raised the lantern. At the door of Carriage Number Two stood an elderly conductress with a beret pulled down over her ears.

"Where's Nadya?" asked Vasily Ivanovich.

"What Nadya?"

Vasily Ivanovich wondered if he had got the day wrong. Nadya would doubtless come tomorrow, on the next train, the Forty-Four.

"Ah," guessed the conductress at last. "That must be

the fly-by-night I've taken over from. She's gone on a course, dear."

"What course?"

"Who knows? Either for chief conductress, or even higher. You'll have to go a long way to find her."

"You're late", said Vasily Ivanovich sternly.

This time, the train seemed to stand in the station for an amazingly long time.

Finally, the carriages moved off, hastily jolting and banging over the points. Like an incandescent coal, the red light glided smoothly into the distance.

There was the crackling sound of a horn, like the cry of a night bird. It was Nikifor signalling from the crossing that the train had proceeded from the station.

The engine wailed in the darkness, and, one after another, dozens of other engines answered it from the forest.

The red eye was receding more and more slowly; then it seemed to stop and stay in one place.

"Optical illusion," said Vasily Ivanovich, and he sighed. The warm smell of anthracite was fading in the cool air. The red light suddenly went out. The station was enveloped in the hush of the forest.

Vasily Ivanovich listened intently to that silence and suddenly realized how swiftly the difficult, happy, big life was flying past him, how it was trying to take him with it and for some reason he was resisting.

Vasily Ivanovich went into the hall. Koska was sitting on the settee with the papers.

"Well, what have we got?" said Vasily Ivanovich. "There you are, sitting your young life away. You think I'm going to spend all my time mollycoddling you here? They'll go and appoint Ionov in my place, so why not try and learn his job? Come and I'll show you how to fill in the traffic log."

Koska was not a bit surprised. After the passenger train had gone through, the chief was always angry.

YURI NAGIBIN

(b. 1920)

Yuri Nagibin has been popular with the general reading public for several decades. His stories of the 1950s: "The Pipe", "Winter Oak", "Komarov"; his scripts for the films "The Chairman", "Tchaikovsky", "The Realm of Women", and his autobiographical stories in "The Book of Childhood" (1972) brought him widespread acclaim.

Nagibin's talent is not easy to define, so varied is his work and with such unpredictable originality is it brought to fulfilment. One may mention his keen and constant interest in the vital problems of the time, many of which he envisaged long before they became "global" (for example, the relationship between man and nature). His

professional interest in the literature and art of the past have earned him a reputation as a master of psychological prose and a writer on war themes...

Nagibin's first short story, "A Double Mistake", appeared in 1940. In 1942, while on the Volkhov Front, he was accepted by proxy as a member of the USSR Writers' Union.

Nagibin is a brilliant story-teller. He has absorbed techniques of the Russian and Soviet novel and, without succumbing to the temptation of choosing a model for imitation, has created his own "Nagibin" story, easily recognizable among innumerable examples of this genre.

*THE YOUNG HUSBAND**

Voronov learned from the old woman who ferried him across the Pra that it was a difficult business trying to find a huntsman in Podsvyat'ye. She was tall and well-proportioned, with sturdy legs in boots; her broad round shoulders were swathed in a quilted khaki jacket; her head, in spite of its being summertime, was covered with a warm army hat that concealed her white hair; and when, as she manipulated the pole, she turned her wrinkled little face away from Voronov, it was a pleasure to watch her. Time had spared her figure but had ruined her hands—dry, gnarled and blotchy; yet it had preserved the sparkling eyes with the bluish whites on her wrinkled face. Her lively, undimmed eyes twinkling roguishly, the old woman explained at length:

"You're a bit late. You can't find a huntsman two days before the season, and at the height of the season it's a waste of time!.. True, it was easier before. But now some of them have given it up completely, because it pays better to work for the kolkhoz these days—just take my youngest, Vaska—and some have gone to work for the state. But the huntsmen are on lake conservancy. Like Anatoly Ivanovich, my eldest. I expect you hardly know about it in Moscow..." The slight hint of condescension detectable in her last words referred not to her son's obscurity as far as the capital was concerned, but to Voronov's ignorance.

"No, but why?" objected Voronov. "I've often heard that Anatoly Ivanovich is the most reliable man on the hunting side."

"They don't know much in Moscow about Meshchora,"

said the old woman accusingly. "Has Anatoly Ivanovich got nothing better to do than take guests from the capital on boat trips? He's preserving our countryside! "

"So what do you advise me to do?" asked Voronov.

Voronov loved hunting: he had stamina, a sharp eye and a steady hand, but he was not a seasoned sportsman; moreover, this was his first visit to Meshchora.

"I can't give you any advice," replied the old lady, nimbly directing the manoeuvrable little craft across a wave. "I'll say one thing: try and knock up one of the oldsters—they don't have jobs to do and they love hunting. But I doubt you'll find anybody."

The boat grated over the river bed and stopped abruptly. The bank was two or three metres away. Gathering up her skirt, the old woman put one foot over the side, then the other, applied her chest to the stern and pushed the boat on to the beach.

Voronov was jerked backwards by the firm immobility of the bank. He took out a ten-ruble note and offered it to the old woman.

"Here's your change", she said and, in reply to Voronov's gesture of protest, added, "That's our tariff: ferry across, five; night's lodgings, three; for a huntsman—twenty-five for twenty-four hours... Listen, try knocking at the door of that hut. Ask for Gaffer, perhaps you'll talk him into it."

Voronov thanked her and set off along the hummocky bank to the house she had indicated.

The door was opened by an old woman strangely like his ferrywoman. A young figure and a wrinkled little face with dark, lively button eyes. She was dressed in the same way too: a quilted khaki jacket, boots, a fur hat with ear-flaps and an angular depression where there had been an army star. "Looks as though the old women here are still fighting a war of their own," thought Voronov with a smile.

"No, dear, Gaffer won't go, he's poorly," she said. "He only just managed to get back from Velikoye yesterday..."

Nevertheless, she admitted Voronov into the hut where the sick master was lying on a high-pillowed bed under a pile of sheepskins. Gaffer himself was not visible; there was just the protruding wedge of a white beard stained yellow with tobacco smoke.

"Supposing I pay well?" said Voronov.

"You hear? Eh, mother?" The weak voice came from deep inside the bed, and the white wedge quivered.

"Shut up!" shouted his wife. "He's in a fever, but he's still all for it! As you see, we can't help you, dear," she said sternly to Voronov.

"So where am I to find a huntsman?" insisted Voronov.

"How are you going to find one if there aren't any?" said the lady of the house angrily.

Had such a conversation occurred a few years back, it would have ended there; Voronov's Meshchora hunt would have been over without ever having even begun. Previously, he had been inclined to exaggerate the adversities of life; the most insignificant obstacle had seemed insurmountable to him. But with the years he had developed a happy confidence that there are no hopeless predicaments and that a calm and sober persistence is capable of demolishing any obstacle. His voice was almost cheerful when he asked;

"So what about a huntsman anyway?"

The old woman's thin eyelashes went up in fright.

"But where are you going to get one, my dear?" she said, not angrily this time, but in dismay.

"That's what I am asking you," said Voronov.

The old woman's eyes slid from right to left, as if there might indeed be hiding, somewhere in the vicinity, a huntsman about whom this Moscow fellow was well and truly aware.

"I really don't know what to say... Perhaps you might talk the young husband into it?"

"As if the young husband'll go," came from under the pile of sheepskins.

"He'll go," replied Voronov for the old woman. "Where is he to be found?"

"The end hut to the left of us," explained the old woman. "Go to him, dear, perhaps you'll talk him into it. Mind you, he only gave up being a huntsman when he got married."

"He won't go," came from under the sheepskins again. "He won't leave his wife."

"What's this young husband's name?" asked Voronov.

"Vaska," replied the old woman. "What else would it be?"

"He won't go," reached Voronov's ears when he was already in the passage, and he decided that the young husband's resistance to the temptation of easy money was one of Meshchora's noteworthy features of which the locals were proud.

Voronov had forgotten to ask on which side of the street Vaska's house was on. Of the two end huts, he chose the one that looked somewhat cleaner and was decorated with an iron cockerel on the roof ridge and with carved shutters freshly painted white. One would expect newly-weds to live in this neat dwelling with its pretensions to elegance. Pushing the door open, Voronov went into a big, gloomy passage that smelt of calf, rotting straw underfoot, chicken droppings and somewhat gamey duck meat. In the middle of the passage, in a noose hung a fair-sized bundle of mallard and teal with bunches of grass in their rumps. "So he hasn't given up hunting altogether," noted Voronov. A curly-haired, broad-shouldered young man in riding breeches and white shirt with the sleeves rolled up rose from his knees—he had been hewing a log with an axe—and asked Voronov what he wanted.

"I want you," replied Voronov.

The young man drove the axe into the log and went first into the hut. As Voronov followed him through the door, he made way for a little woman carrying a full bucket.

The home of the newly-weds was as friendly inside as outside. A freshly whitewashed stove, coloured wallpaper, the window ledges, with their pots of geraniums, many illustrations from a glossy magazine on the walls. In the corner there was a chest of drawers with a lace cover, on which stood a goblet of cheap coloured glass, two big, heavy sea-shells of the kind in which the "sea murmurs", some photographs on a stand, and in the middle, inevitably, one of the young couple.

On the bench near the door sat an old woman in the quilted jacket and boots evidently considered a must for Meshchora households, as Voronov finally decided. But he recognized this one as his ferrywoman and guessed that she must be the mother of the newly-wed Vaska. On the other

bench, at the window, sat a young woman, her headscarf fallen on to her shoulders. Her cotton blouse was a tight fit round the big, firm bust.

"I want to ask you a favour," said Voronov, turning to her. "Will you let the master go out with me?"

The woman glanced at Voronov in astonishment and looked down. Her eyes were beautiful, the lustrous whites faintly tinged with blue.

"She hasn't got a master!" commented Vaska with a gentle smile. "That's my young sister!"

Voronov bit his lip in chagrin; he should have realized that this wasn't the wife. She was sitting formally, the way guests sit in the country, and in any case she was strikingly like her brother: the same curly chestnut-brown hair, the same swarthy flush on the cheeks, and the same moist, languishing eyes with pale-blue whites.

"Well, what have you to say about my suggestion?" asked Voronov.

"No point in him going! .. A waste of time!" This came from the young woman who had met Voronov in the doorway. She was standing on the threshold, her head well beneath the low lintel and holding the empty bucket against her hip. Voronov was disappointed to notice that Vaska's young wife was not as good-looking as her handsome husband; she was of diminutive height, and her face was not particularly fetching either: small, freckled, with bottle-green eyes. Moreover, this young wife wasn't so very young; she was past twenty-five, perhaps older. She was wearing an old, tight-fitting short dress, with worn slippers on her feet. But Voronov sensed that she had character and was not surprised that in reply to his wife's sharp comment, Vaska merely smiled silently and held his hands apart in resignation.

"Grandma could back me up for old time's sake," said Voronov, turning to the old woman.

"I'm not the boss here," replied Vaska's mother.

There was no offence or defiance intended, just the affirmation of a commonly known and rightful fact.

Voronov now knew what to do.

"Can I have a couple of words with you?" he said to Vaska's wife.

They went out into the passage. Slowly and carefully, Voronov explained to the little woman that he would only take her husband for three or four days, that he knew the Meshchora ways and he would pay well, because he was a busy man and too rarely allowed himself to go hunting, but when he did money was no object. Finally, unlike the other Moscow sportsmen, he was not forbidding Vaska himself to do some shooting as well...

The little woman listened to him, her lips moving. She was evidently working out how much she would get. The calculation satisfied her; she smiled, her bottle-green eyes flashed and with a fervent movement not lacking in grace, she offered Voronov her hand.

"It's a deal! "

There was a glimpse of a round, well-shaped forearm and a round elbow as her sleeve fell open. Voronov, whom success had made indulgent, realized that she had something about her.

"Vasily, get ready! " she called in a determined voice. "You'll go hunting with our visitor."

"I ought to ask the farm chairman..."

"I'll tell her myself. She was asking the other day why it's always the other men that ask permission for time off; only mine seems tied. Besides, I've got to clear up and wash the floors—the mess you've made in here! .."

Vaska looked at his wife, sighed and then, fighting down some kind of impulse, began getting ready.

The huntsman's preparations did not take long. He stuffed some hay in his rubber boots, wound warm flannel cloths round his feet and pulled the boots tightly on to his sturdy legs. He packed his ammunition pouch with time-darkened cartridges and belted it round his waist, then put some rubber and wooden decoy ducks into a knapsack. Voronov watched with pleasure his free, casual and yet very precise movements. Moreover, Vaska was whistling something through his teeth, not in the least conscious of the picturesque figure he made.

"You're glad you're getting away from home!" commented his wife enviously, who was washing clothes behind the stove.

"Would you rather I didn't go?" responded Vaska eagerly.

"Rather he didn't! We've got a rich one here, to be sure!"

Voronov emptied his rucksack, leaving only the essentials: bread, butter, tinned food, a thermos of strong tea, spare socks and a blanket. Vasily fetched a wicker basket from the yard with a live decoy quacking inside.

Vasily's wife came to see them off. She put on a tight-waisted velveteen jacket and high rubber boots, which made her look younger at once.

"Let's have that," she said to her husband and took his gun from him. "Are you going to Velikoye?"

"To the little lake," replied Vaska.

She arched her eyebrows in surprise and Voronov sensed something amiss. Back in Moscow he had heard that one should hunt at Velikoye, and he had a fleeting suspicion that Vaska simply didn't want to go too far away from home.

"Would Velikoye be more suitable?" he said.

"Hordes of people on Velikoye," answered Vaska, looking at his wife and not at Voronov.

Voronov also looked at Vaska's wife, counting on her support; but she simply shrugged her thin shoulders and walked quickly on ahead to a boat visible behind the sedge. Indeed, although superior in the home, she did not claim to oust her husband's authority in hunting matters.

Vasily nudged Voronov with his elbow and, smiling, nodded at his wife: the butt of the long Tula shotgun was bumping against her heels.

"It's only our wives who see me and my brother Anatoly off hunting," he announced with some pride and added thoughtfully, "Anyway, he wouldn't manage otherwise on account of him being disabled."

When they went up to the canal, the boat had already been untied and strewn with fresh, slightly damp hay which Vasily's wife had gathered straight from the bank. Vasily put down the rucksacks, the basket and the gun, carefully covering them with his tarpaulin jacket, and took out from under the straw an oar that looked more like a spade.

"Climb in, comrade huntsman, we don't know your name! "

"Sergei Ivanovich." Voronov clumsily lowered himself on to the bottom of the boat; marsh water as black as tar slopped over the curved gunwale.

"All the best! " said Vaska to his wife.

Looking glumly at Voronov, she pulled her husband by the sleeve with a quick, short movement, pressed herself against him sideways for a moment, smiled shyly, pushed him away and, without looking round, stepped off towards the house through the grass that was higher than her waist.

Vaska dug the oar into the bank and pushed off; the boat glided down the narrow water way, softly bumping against the projections of the bank and, with a dry rustle, parting the razor-sharp sedge drooping over the little canal.

Voronov unbuttoned his shirt collar. All his worries were behind him; he was speeding like an arrow to its target. He had been told so much in Moscow about things being difficult in Meshchora, about the stubbornness of the people there, who must be humoured if anything was to be got out of them, for they could be intractable and stiffly unreceptive. He had found himself so easily in this setting; he had got what he wanted!

It was a pleasure to watch the skill and strength with which Vaska plied the oar. The young man's strong body, slightly softened by inactivity, was clearly enjoying the exercise. His bulging muscles worked under the shirt and his breathing was light and easy.

Soon the canal began to zigzag, and if Voronov had still harboured a slight suspicion that Vaska had chosen the little lake for the easier trip, it had now vanished without a trace. The long boat could not negotiate the sharp turns. Before each bend, Vaska would push with all his strength on the oar, using it as a pole, and the boat would run on to the shallows with gathering speed. Vaska would jump into the water, lift up the heavy prow and swing it round into the other leg of the turn, after which he would push the bow into the water. The boat was heavy, but when Voronov wanted to help, Vaska refused.

Even so, just before coming out into the Pra, where the narrow channel spread out into shallow open water over the marshy shore, the boat ran aground and stuck so hard that Voronov had to get out and lend a hand.

"If my wife saw me, I wouldn't half be for it! " confided Vaska.

"Why?"

"She can't bear it when something's too much for me." Vaska laughed.

"You love her?" asked Voronov.

"What else?" said Vaska joyously and in surprise. "You saw what she's like! .. Who am I compared with her?.." He threw his hands apart.

He was standing knee-deep in water, in a jersey with the sleeves pushed up; the warm sweat was running down his swarthy face, down his neck, tanned almost black, and down his muscular arms; his skin looked as if it had been varnished. Vaska was so good-looking, so pure and naive, that Voronov thought, "Oh, laddie, you're worth much more than she is! " He didn't say as much, of course, and they floated further along the wooded bank of the Pra.

The Pra did not look in the least like a river here. It had spread out into a wide lake with flat green islets, with reed-choked backwaters on which could be seen the dark boats of fishermen. Seagulls were swooping over the water; high in the sky, ducks were stringing along, singly and in flocks. A kite, sailing right over a cloud, dived headlong smoothly down to the water and, touching it with its hooked talons, soared up again with a roach in them. A crow detached itself from the top of a pine and followed. It quickly caught up the kite and robbed it of its prey. Returning to its watch-post, the crow quickly gobbled up the roach and waited for the industrious kite to catch another one.

They turned off into another canal, straight and narrow, unlike the first. At times the corridor widened, the water spread out into patches—the canal led from one little marsh lake to another. Here, too, the banks were low, but the sedge was tall, higher than a man, and, mixed with bushes, came right down to the water's edge, turning the canal into a dark and gloomy tunnel. It was as if dusk had suddenly fallen. Voronov began to feel uneasy, as if they were going to be late for the sunset.

"We'll be dead on time," said Vaska reassuringly.

From time to time, a snipe flew right overhead or a sand piper fluttered up out of the grass. A tiny duckling, not much bigger than a fledgeling, burst out from under the black, flat leaf of a water-lily and shot away from them

at full pelt. The unhappy bird, unaware that, having broken out of its shell too late, it was not destined to be a grown-up, was trying to save its short life for all its worth. Scuttling over the water with the pathetic stumps of its undeveloped wings, it sped along the canal, now and again overtaken by the bow of the boat until it finally plunged into the weeds on the bank. No sooner had it vanished than something fluttered noisily out. For a second, the black, ragged silhouette of a mallard soared in a bright gap between the bushes and suddenly the rosy glow of a shot erupted in Voronov's face. Before the echo had died away, the bird described an arc and fell into the bushes.

Voronov was shaken not so much by the unexpected shot banging close to his ear as by the superhuman speed and agility of Vaska, who had dropped the oar to seize and throw up the rifle with such remarkable accuracy. For some reason, Voronov had the idea that even now the other had tried hard for his wife's sake, and he felt irritated at the exultant Vaska. In that elated mood, he would get all the ducks and nothing would be left for him, Voronov...

"Here's what, Vasily; let's make an agreement: we'll both shoot at the ones in flight, but I'll only try for the sitting ducks."

"Right you are, Sergei Ivanovich! " Vasily stood nearer the bank and stepped straight from the boat into the high grasses. They closed up behind him, and when they parted again, Vaska was carrying a big drake with an emerald-green neck.

"We've made a start, Sergei Ivanovich! "

"Yes," agreed Voronov drily.

The lake opened out before them suddenly and the clouds, reddened by the sunset, were floating on a round mirror of water. Along the edge, the water was dark and gloomy, reflecting a dense line of squat firs surrounding the lake. Vaska did not need to survey the expanse of the lake for the best place; he promptly propelled the boat towards a half-submerged islet on the left bank, facing the sunset. Once there, he set out the dummies and let the decoy down on to the water, after which he pushed the boat into the bushes.

"Can you see properly, Sergei Ivanovich?" he asked.

"I can see fine, but they can see us fine from above," muttered Voronov.

"That's all right," said Vaska reassuringly.

Voronov prepared for the long wait with which a duck-shoot usually begins, but almost immediately he heard Vaska's soft, calm voice.

"Teal on the right, Sergei Ivanych."

Voronov started and quickly ran his eyes over the water, but he could see only the dummies and, among them, the very big, somehow unreal decoy.

"By the end dummy, on the right," prompted Vaska, as calm as ever.

Voronov fired with the feeling that he was shooting the dummy. The shot fanned out over the water; one of the two equally motionless teals merely rocked and casually turned round its invulnerable wooden side, but the other flattened itself on the water, stretching out its neck, revealing in death the life that had been throbbing inside it.

When they glided out to pick it up, a mallard, already coming down to settle, soared up again. Voronov fired and the duck somersaulted into the water. It dived down and bobbed up some thirty metres away from them. Voronov, who had reloaded his gun, finished it off.

"That's it," said Vaska approvingly.

But this was only the beginning. Rarely had Voronov enjoyed such successful shooting. He brought down three teal at one go, then two full-grown birds in succession and a longtail as big as a swan.

Vaska also wasn't left idle. He shot three mallards in flight, but one was only winged and got away; the other plunged into the reeds and they couldn't find it in the darkness of the watery thicket.

The lake was small and the intensive shooting frightened the ducks away; but in the silence that fell Voronov was not deserted by the oblivious, happy excitement that made him so fond of the sport. He only came out of it when the first star peeked through the sky. Tiny, clean and radiant, it was clearly and sharply reflected in the already dark waters of the lake.

"Well, Vasily, that's enough for today, my friend! .."

They set off for the channel to spend the night. They found a place immediately; right at the water's edge, not far from the narrows, there was a wide, squat rick of dense sedge grass. Vaska dragged the bow of the boat up to the beach, unloaded the rucksacks and began making the beds, vigorously kneading the springy grass with its acrid smell of the marshes.

Then they had supper and drank tea out of the thermos. It was quite dark. The sky was populated with stars, the yellow flank of the moon was swelling up over a palisade of distant firs. It was still warm, although from time to time a breath of chill air came from the channel as it cooled down. Eating marinated pike perch and drinking sweet tea, Voronov went over the details of the day's shooting. Vaska answered in monosyllables, laughing rather curtly, and Voronov decided that this was some kind of professional trait—not to talk about the day's shooting on the eve of another. His excitement subsided and the thrill of success faded; it was a thing of the past; the action was over and could not have any influence on the future.

A pleasant fatigue was stealing over his body; he felt tranquil and at peace.

"Are you married, Sergei Ivanych?" said Vasily's voice.

"Of course I'm married," replied Voronov and caught himself sounding just a trifle discontented.

"Is your wife in Moscow?" asked Vaska cautiously.

"No, she's at a seaside resort."

"Alone, or with children?"

"We haven't got any children."

Vasily lifted himself up on one shoulder, looked at Voronov for some time and then said very gravely:

"Aren't you a bit scared ... letting her go on her own?"

Voronov laughed. The naive exclamation had not offended him. On the contrary, he was feeling pleasantly secure: he was absolutely sure of his wife; moreover, he was not in the least worried about her behaviour.

"Ah, my dear friend! " he said with an appearance of superiority. "You think you can prevent that?"

The huntsman said nothing. Voronov could not see his face in the dark, but felt that he had fallen into a troubled and gloomy reverie.

Voronov drank up his tea and lay down on the fragrant grass. Coming out of his thoughts, Vaska went up to Voronov.

"Sergei Ivanovich," he said hesitantly, "you're not afraid of spending the night here alone, are you?"

"What is there to be afraid of?" responded Voronov, suppressing a smile. He understood that it was not jealousy talking in Vaska, but the sudden keen yearning for the loved one that can clutch at the heart during the briefest of partings. Even so, Vaska seemed a little comical and pathetic to him now.

"I'll just pop home quickly. I'll be back before dawn. Don't worry! "

"Go ahead, go ahead," said Voronov and, so that Vaska should regard the conversation as over, he turned away and pulled his jacket collar over his head.

He heard Vaska pulling the boat down to the water; the bottom snarled as it was dragged over the sedge, the sand on the beach grated drily and sharply, then there was a hollow splash of water and an odour of damp crept under his jacket. The water began to bubble with a dying sound under the bows; Vaska had rowed off to his wife. Voronov imagined the journey that he had to make along the two canals and the river; he remembered all the turns he had to negotiate, dragging the boat on to the bank and swinging it round to the other half of the bend, then the sandbank which the two of them together had had difficulty in clearing. And all this in the dark, in the damp cold of the night. The trip would take a good four hours. Four there and four back. To be back by dawn, Vaska could not spend even an hour with his wife. What a powerful feeling it must be to send him on that devilish journey!

Voronov sighed and threw back the skirt of his jacket. There had been a time in his life when he too had been able to rush goodness knows where at any hour of day or night; at the first call, or sometimes without any summons at all. He, too, had been full of the same passionate, difficult restlessness that was now driving the young huntsman through the night over the waterway. Then he suddenly felt afraid for himself, for his peace of mind, for God knows what else. He had known right up to the break that

everything could be put right—all he had to do was entrust himself to his feelings. But, he had told himself, it's better, quieter, simpler this way. And to cut off his retreat, he had married his present wife, whom he had long known as an intelligent, kind and loyal person. If there was no bliss, there was no pain either, and that also meant something...

And now the meeting with this young man had upset Voronov, had made him remember what he preferred to forget. But that would pass with Vaska too one day, and he would see his wife as someone like Voronov saw her: an inconspicuous, freckled, grumpy, demanding woman, up to her ears in domestic worries. Vaska might find the hangover unpleasant... "What am I up to?" thought Voronov glumly. "Measuring my life against his?"

The star-sprinkled sky hung very low overhead; it looked as though it might not be able to hold them and they would fall through. And they were indeed doing so. Here and there, crystalline green in flight, now steeply, now in wide arcs, they were falling down to earth. A warm vapour was rising into the air from the earth, overheated during the day. The sky with all its stars now faded, as if receding, now, filling with radiance, sank lower down; it seemed to be breathing.

Voronov was awakened by the sharp chill of dawn. In a moment his clothes, the jacket with which he had covered himself, the dense, flattened grass under his side and the hat on his head stopped retaining the warmth given out by his body as if by arrangement and suddenly became cold, damp, heavy and hostilely uncomfortable. Voronov shrugged his shoulders spasmodically, and the brief tremor caused by the movement gave him a little warmth and cheer. He sat up suddenly, already aware that his next feeling would be one of annoyance at Vasily's absence. He saw the grey, seemingly overcast but, in fact, already clear sky that had not yet turned blue; he saw the bright band of the sunrise behind the forest, the sedge, hoary with dew and the wet black prow of the boat protruding over the edge of the bank.

Voronov walked up to the boat.

Seated in the boat, Vasily was cleaning yesterday's ducks.

"Hullo, young husband! " called Voronov.

Vaska raised a face slightly pale under the dark sun-tan and looked at Voronov.

"She swore at me for leaving you, Sergei Ivanovich," he began with a joyful smile that did not match his words. "I said you'd sent me. Don't give me away."

"I won't."

Vaska looked at Voronov cautiously, almost furtively.

"Don't get the idea I don't trust her. I just felt so miserable... I don't know why, but I thought she might take to someone else, she might even be with him now. I made myself sick with those thoughts! " Vaska threw his hands apart with the familiar gesture. He suddenly turned his curly head, grinned at something private and added, "Oh, I'm a bad egg, I am! " A kind of dull, intoxicated glitter was set in dark eyes with the protuberant blue whites.

"You won't be able to go hunting now," commented Voronov. "You've knocked yourself out! "

"Come off it, Sergei Ivanovich! I could do all that now! I could..."

Vaska said this with such sincerity and simplicity that not a shadow of doubt remained: his strength and joy of living came from his tiny, busy wife.

Voronov felt another surge of irritation against Vaska. This happiness was annoying him, it was somehow getting him down and humiliating him. He was ready to tell the lad that the time would come when his young, eager feelings must dry up, must fade, but instead he asked almost sadly:

"Why do you love her so much?"

"What can I say to that?" replied Vaska in astonishment, as if the idea had never occurred to him before. "What would I be without her? Vaska, and that's all! But now I'm a human being, a husband. You might say the father of a family. But that's not even the point..."

"Wait, wait," said Voronov, smiling. "It's a bit early for you to be calling yourself the father of a family. You need children for that."

"And children we have! " said Vaska, laughing happily. "Katka and Vaska, the twins. And then there's Senka, he's still crawling about, he's staying with his grandmother..."

"I don't understand anything," said Voronov with a kind of unpleasant feeling. "How many years ... have you been married?"

"We're getting on; it'll soon be six! "

"Then what sort of a young husband are you?" asked Voronov rudely.

Again Vaska threw his hands apart.

"I don't know, but that's what they call me..."

1956

Translated by Alex Miller

VLADIMIR BOGOMOLOV

(b. 1926)

Vladimir Bogomolov was a reconnaissance officer during the Second World War and had seen battle on the approaches to Moscow, on the North-Western Front, in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia, in Poland, Germany and Manchuria. All his stories are about the war. "But no matter how well I know my material I never rely on my memory alone," he says. "I check and double-check every fact, every detail, and only then I believe in its authenticity." For his novel, "The Moment of Truth" ("In August '44") he amassed 24,679 cuttings and reference notes, which is testimony enough of his thoroughness and meticulous processing of material.

"Ivan", his first book which appeared in 1958, tells about a young boy, a scout, whom the war first deprived of a normal childhood and then of life itself. The book became enormously popular with readers. The film based on this story won the Grand Prix at the film festival in Venice in 1963.

The novel "The Moment of Truth" deals with the deeds of Soviet scouts in the war.

The short story "First Love" adds to the general picture of life in wartime showing how war can be destructive to love, happiness and life itself.

*FIRST LOVE**

We lay very close together, and the ground did not feel cold, or hard, or damp.

We had been lovers for going on five months now, ever since she had come to our regiment. I was nineteen, she was eighteen. We met secretly, company commander and nurse's aid. No one knew that we were in love; no one knew that there were three of us now.

"I can tell it's a boy," she whispered for the tenth time. She was so eager to please me. "And he'll look just like you."

"If worse comes to worse, I'll settle for a girl, and she can look like you," I whispered back, but my thoughts were far away.

About five hundred metres up front my men lay asleep in shelters and in open trenches. Still farther up ahead, past the forward outposts, which infrequent German flares lighted up from time to time, was Height 162, now shrouded in darkness. At dawn my company was to do what another company had tried to do a week ago—capture that height. So far no one in the battalion knew this except the five officers our regimental commander had summoned to the headquarters' dug-out earlier in the evening. After reading the order he turned to me.

"Remember," he said, "as soon as the 'Katyushas' have fired and the green flares go up, you charge. Your neighbours will follow too, but you are to capture the height! "

We lay in each other's arms, and as I kissed her I could not help thinking of the coming battle. But I was even

more concerned about what would happen to her, and I racked my brain for a solution.

"I've got to sleep for two now," she was whispering in the lilting tones of her native North. "You know, sometimes at night I think I'll wake up in the morning and find that this is all over ... the trenches, the blood, the death... It's been more than two years already. It can't go on forever, can it? Imagine the sun rising in the morning and no war, no war at all..."

"I'm going to the major this minute! " I gently removed my arm from beneath her head and got up. "I'll tell him the whole story. You must be sent home. At once! "

"Have you lost your mind?" she sat up, seized hold of my hand and pulled me to her. "What a silly you are! Why, the major will skin you alive! "

And, imitating the regimental commander's low, gruff voice, she drawled in a strained whisper: "Sexual intercourse with subordinates does not promote a unit's fighting efficiency and undermines an officer's authority. If I find any officer involved in anything of the sort I'll send him packing, whatever his rank! And with a testimonial that will make the guard-house too good for him! Win the war, and then you can love whomever you wish as much as you wish. For the present... I forbid it! "

Pleased with herself, she lay back and laughed soundlessly, so no one should hear us. Yes, I knew what I was in for. The major was very strait-laced and convinced that war was no place for women and love.

"I'm going to see him anyway. "

"Shh." She nuzzled her cheek against mine. After a brief pause she sighed and whispered: "I'll take care of it myself. I've thought it all out. You won't be the father."

"I won't be the father?! " I felt myself growing hot. "What do you mean?"

"How silly you are! " she laughed merrily. "No, heaven forbid, he shouldn't be like you!.. I'll take care of everything. In the birth certificate and all that you'll be the father, but right now I'll tell the major a different story."

She was always so guileless, so naively truthful, that this show of cunning amazed me.

"Who will you say it is?"

"One of the dead men. Baikov, for instance."

"No, leave the dead alone."

"All right, Kindyaev then."

Sergeant Kindyaev, a handsome, dissolute young fellow who drank too much, had been caught stealing recently and sent away.

Touched, I opened up my greatcoat and pulled her to me.

"Easy there! " She pushed her fists against my chest in fright. "You'll crush us! " (She took a naive pleasure in speaking of herself in the plural.) "My silly darling. Consider yourself lucky you met me. With me, you can't go wrong."

She laughed gaily, but I didn't feel like laughing at all.

"Listen, you've got to go to the major right away," I said.

"In the middle of the night?! "

"I'll take you there. You can explain and tell him you can't stand it here any longer."

"But that's not true! "

"Please, for my sake! How can you go on? You must leave. Don't you see ... suppose ... in tomorrow's battle?"

"Tomorrow's battle?" She was alert at once. "Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes."

For a while she lay quiet, but I could tell by her breathing, her dear, familiar breathing, that she was upset.

"Well ... one doesn't run away from battle," she said finally. "Besides, I couldn't even if I wanted to. It'll take some time before the medical commission examines me and the order comes through the division... I'll talk to the major tomorrow. All right?"

I didn't say anything. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Do you think I want to talk to him?" she whispered suddenly. "I'd rather die. He said to me time and again: 'Now, keep a smart head on your shoulders! ' And what have I gone and done..."

She gulped and turned away, burying her face in the sleeve of her coat, and began to shake with noiseless sobs. I held her close and kissed her small mouth, her forehead,

her eyes, salty with tears.

"Let me go," she whispered, pushing me away. "Will you see me back?"

We descended into the dark, damp ravine where the battalion aid station was situated. I held her by the waist which had already grown a bit plumper. I held her with both hands, watching over every step she took so she shouldn't slip or fall. As if I could protect her from the war, from the battle at dawn, where she would have to be running across the field, tripping and falling as she dragged the wounded men to safety!

* * *

Fifteen years have gone by, but I remember it all as if it had been yesterday. The "Katyushas" opened up at dawn, the mortars and heavy machine-guns barked furiously, green flares soared into the air...

When the sun rose I had broken through to that height with the remainder of my company. Half an hour later, in a solidly-made German trench, the regimental commander and someone else congratulated me, embraced me, shook my hand. I stood there like a piece of wood, feeling nothing, hearing nothing.

The sun... if I could send it back below the horizon! If I could recall the dawn!.. Only two hours ago there were three of us...

But the sun rose slowly, inexorably. I stood on the hilltop, and she ... she remained behind, over there, where I could see soldiers from the burial squad moving about.

And no one, no one knew what she had meant to me and that there had been three of us...

YEVGENI NOSOV

(b. 1925)

Yevgeni Nosov entered the literary scene in the early 1960s. He was born and bred in a village near Kursk, in a hard-working family. Like the majority of his generation he fought in the Second World War. In the battle for Königsberg he was gravely wounded. After the war he worked in Central Asia for several years, and only returned to Kursk in 1951. As a newspaper reporter he was always on the go, travelling to collective farms and construction projects all over the country, and this experience greatly enriched his knowledge of life and people. He finished the Higher Courses in Literature in Moscow, and published his collection of stories which were an immediate success: "Shores" (1971), "The Bridge" (1974), "The Grasses Rustling in the Meadow" (1977) and "In Open Country" (1980).

Nosov loves nature, fishing, and the modest beauty of Central Russian landscapes. He has a passion for painting and one can feel this

in his stories, for only an artist could see a field, a meadow, a wood, a river or a lake so clearly, missing nothing, not the smallest detail. This is, for instance, how he describes a rainbow: "While I slept, the wind suddenly coming from somewhere divided the clouds in the western sky into layers, and the setting sun pressed its unblinking eye to the long, long slit, peeping to see if it should come out and shine tomorrow or keep in hiding for another day. And high above, over the radiant river valley hung a rainbow—an enormous arc of coloured ribbons. It emerged from some riverside shrubs and then, making a huge semicircle, stuck its other end into the gardens of some village or other, three kilometres away."

The story "A Living Flame" is dedicated to those whose life, barely blossoming out, was destroyed in the all-devouring flames of war.

*A LIVING FLAME**

When Auntie Olga glanced into my room she found me at my desk again.

"Enough writing," she said, raising her voice in a tone of command. "A little puttering in the garden will do you good."

She went to the pantry and took out a small box made of birch bark. While I gave my muscles some pleasant exercise, levelling the damp earth with a rake, she sat down on the bench beside the house and sorted little packets and paper twists of flower seeds in her lap.

"I see you're not putting in any poppies, Auntie Olga. Why is that?"

"Poppies? That's not a flower," she replied with conviction. "It's a vegetable. We grow poppies in the vegetable plots, together with onions and cucumbers."

I laughed. "Well, you're mistaken. Remember the words of that old song?"

*As white as marble was her brow.
But her cheeks like poppies flamed."*

"It flowers only two days—and what good is that for a garden? Here today and gone tomorrow. The noggins spoil the looks of the flowerbed all the rest of the summer."

But when Auntie Olga wasn't looking I dropped a pinch of poppy seeds in the very middle of the flowerbed. A few days later the green sprouts pushed up out of the earth.

Auntie Olga confronted me. "Did you put in all those

poppies? That's real naughty of you! Well, I left three sprouts for your sake. I weeded out the others."

I had to leave unexpectedly on a business trip and did not return until two weeks later. It was a pleasure to step into Auntie Olga's quiet little cottage after the hot, tiring journey. The newly washed floor made my room refreshingly cool. The jasmine outside the window threw a lacy shadow on my writing-desk.

I must have looked as sweaty and tired as I felt.

"Would you like a mug of *kvass*?" Auntie Olga suggested, with a compassionate glance. "Alexei was very fond of *kvass*. He used to bottle it himself."

When I rented the room Auntie Olga had raised her eyes to the wall above the writing-desk. A portrait of a young man in air force uniform hung there. "It won't be in your way, will it?"

"Of course not," I replied.

"That's my son Alexei. This was his room. Well, make yourself at home and stay as long as you like."

Handing me a heavy brass mug of *kvass*, Auntie Olga said: "Your poppies have shot up and put out buds."

When I went out to look, I found the flowerbed unrecognizable. The border was a thick, attractive carpet-runner. Next to it there ran a belt of stocks, those simple evening flowers whose attraction lies not in bright colours but in their pungent, vanilla-like smell. There were clumps of yellow and violet pansies. The purplish velvet caps of Parisian beauties swayed on their slender stems. I saw lots of flowers, some familiar, others new to me.

In the centre of the bed, above all the flowers of many different colours, rose my poppies, their three taut, heavy buds reaching up towards the sun.

They burst into blossom the next day.

Auntie Olga went out to water the flowers but returned immediately, rattling her empty watering-can.

"Come out and look. They're flowering."

From a distance the poppies were torches with living tongues of flame. The sunlight pierced the semi-transparent red petals. As they fluttered gaily in the breeze, the poppies flared up with a quivering bright fire one minute and turned a deep crimson the next. You had the

feeling that if you touched them you would burn your fingers.

The poppies dazzled you with their mischievous, burning brightness. The Parisian beauties, snapdragons and other aristocrats paled beside them.

The poppies flamed violently for two days. At the end of the second day they suddenly shed their petals. The flame went out. At once the luxuriant bed seemed empty.

I picked up a petal, still fresh and covered with dew, and straightened it out in my palm.

"Well, that's all," I said regretfully.

"Yes, they've burned out," Auntie Olga heaved a sigh. "Why didn't I take notice of them before, I wonder? Such a short life, they have, but so full and bright. Like some people's lives."

All of a sudden Auntie Olga seemed older, more hunched. She hurried back into the house.

The neighbours had told me about her son Alexei. He had crash-dived his small fighter plane into a nazi heavy bomber.

I live at the other end of town now but every once in a while I drop in to see Auntie Olga. The last time I was there, not long ago, we sat at the table in the garden drinking tea and sharing news. In the flowerbed beside us there was a flaming bonfire of poppies. Some had shed their petals, like sparks, others were only just unfolding their fiery tongues. From below, more and more of the firm new buds were pushing up out of the damp, vitalizing earth to keep the living flame going.

ALEXANDER YASHIN

(1913-1968)

Alexander Yashin was born in a remote village in the Vologda Region. His first poems were published in the district newspaper and in the magazine "Kolkhoznik". After graduation from a college of education, he taught in a village school. Then came the Literary Institute in Moscow and the war, where he served on the Leningrad Front, scene of the fiercest battles with the fascist invaders.

A talented poet, Alexander Yashin was also a remarkably original story-teller. His short novels "The Orphan" (1962) and "Vologda Wedding" (1962), like his short stories, were loved by the public and aroused passionate controversy among the critics.

The writer Vladimir Soloukhin remembers this of him: "Yashin was a lover of life. He loved hunting, fishing, or just the land plain and simple. But he was also tremendously hard-working... Yashin did not simply proceed from book to book; he plumbed the depths, moving towards an ever more serious understanding of the world around him..."

His premature death did not allow him to complete his short novel "Baba-Yaga", to finish which he beseeched the doctors to give

him at least another three months of life. His "Literary Testament" demonstrates his remarkable personality, courage and sincerity:

"Dear friends!

I'm to have an operation tomorrow. As far as I understand, a serious one...

Looking back, I think how we wrongly waste our time on needless fuss ... when we should simply write... It's the artist's job to stay put and, with his work, by dint of unceasing creative effort, concentration and diligence, to recompense for the great happiness of living on this earth...

You must write, my friends! Write about what you like and any way you like... Express yourselves, your idea of life and your understanding of it as truthfully as possible, of course—as truthfully as is allowed by your character and respect for your own human worth. Only in this case can you be happy and achieve in literature something of your own without betraying its great traditions. Only such work will be of the Party and of the people."

*THE DEAD CAPERCAILLIE**

There is no fun in a shooting game if it doesn't wear you out.

I know hunters who ride up to the mating grounds of the black grouse in car, lower the windows and kill off all the birds to the last one with small-calibre rifles. They don't even spare the hens. They fill the car with their bag so that there's no room left for themselves, and punctually by nine o'clock in the morning they arrive at their offices in time for work...

I also know that they shoot hares at night in a landrover with a swivelling floodlamp. Such hunting is thought particularly successful in the steppe, or forest steppe or in the open fields, when you drive off the roads and where the hapless hare simply has nowhere to hide. They knock it over with the buffers or catch it in the beam of the lamp and squash him under the wheels. Butchery! Industry!

Even the capercaillie is run over sometimes. True, I only know of one such case. A big old male was peeking about the road among some horse droppings when a car came round a turn. Birds are not particularly afraid of cars if they don't see the human beings in them; they become watchful, that's all. The capercaillie stretched its neck out and, while it was eyeing the approaching car and wondering what to do, it lost the chance to take off. Half-crushed, it lay motionless on the road, but, on seeing a man, fluttered and began flapping its wings with its last remaining strength. Only then, apparently, was it aware of the danger. The driver was delighted at his rare good luck and described the incident with satisfaction as a very successful bag.

Some sportsmen!

Real sport should tire you out; you sleep well afterwards.

Boris Zinovyevich already felt tired and weary that evening, long before the beginning of the shoot.

"We'll relax!" he said to his friend, throwing a pre-war Sauer over his shoulder and tucking an axe behind his belt, as all real foresters and woodcutters do. "We'll make for Ugol. There are some spots, friend—you only have to get there and no problems—the capercaillies perch on your head."

"Swanking again..."

"What d'you mean 'swanking'? You don't know my gun! You could bring down elephants with it. And our Ugol? It's a real Belovezhskaya Pushcha. All it needs is the aurochs. We just have to get there and it's in the bag!"

With Boris Zinovyevich, this was not the huntsman's boastfulness. It was self-confidence, excessive, irritating, sometimes totally devoid of elementary common sense. It had hampered him all his life. He had even become superstitious because of it: when something went wrong, failed, didn't work out, he blamed his own self-confidence for it all. Again, no doubt, he had forgotten himself, boasted too much; all that hip, hip, hooray! And now he'd got it in the neck. He began recalling what had led to the failure and it transpired that up to then he had been bursting with self-satisfaction. But this realization always came too late, when nothing could be changed. Right now, his companion's reproaches about swank didn't put him on his guard and he didn't simmer down.

"The main thing is for us to get to the big forest in time and perhaps we'll come back today. There'll be no sense in staying till morning: you can't carry more than three or four of those birds on you. They're as big as rams."

But he did not, however, manage to bag a single capercaillie that evening; darkness came down too quickly. The birds were flying close by; the noises and the crackling of branches could be heard left, right and centre.

"See what I mean?" Boris Zinovyevich asked his friend in a whisper, indicating with his eyes and his head where the latest giant had perched. "Bombers. Take note and creep up to any you like in the morning. They're all yours."

"Thanks. Are those birds?"

"You think they're elks, or something?"

They had to spend the night sitting on wet tussocks of moss. A good thing it wasn't in snow or water. It was impossible to find a dry spot in Ugol in spring. Goodness knows why that dense evergreen forest with its few glades and marshy gullies was called Ugol. It was not bounded by rivers or fences, there was no angle there, acute, obtuse or otherwise.

First, Boris Zinovyevich's legs got cold. He took off his rubber waders and put some moss in them. It seemed to help, but the moss damped the cloths round his feet. If only he could have lit a small fire. But that would have meant ruining the whole outing for a wretched pair of feet. "That would spoil it. We'll stick it out," he told himself. Then his hands felt cold. He wanted to light a cigarette and warm his hands with the cigarette cupped between his palms as in a lantern. But if you so much as scraped a match, the capercaillies—well, they were close by and overhead. No, that was no use either. He could have done with a bite to eat, but he hadn't brought anything with him, feeling sure of a quick bag.

Boris Zinovyevich gave free rein to his imagination and very clearly pictured how he would hear the timid clucking of the first capercaillie before dawn, probably on that nearby fir, and he would kill it without rising from his place. His second quarry would, of course, be shot down off the pine, whose summit was visible even in the darkness, did it tower so high over the serrated wall of the fir-wood. It was about a hundred metres away, and he would have to approach it in big, furtive bounds while the bird was still singing and inspiration had closed its eyes and ears. The third would crash down at Boris Zinovyevich's feet somewhere near the second. And that would only be the beginning...

His happy imagination warmed him somewhat and he even dozed off in a sitting position...

He woke up in terror that night had passed and it was all finished.

"Have we overslept?" he almost shouted, and he wanted to jump up at once, but he couldn't; his legs, arms and head felt so heavy.

"Shhhh! .. Quiet!" hissed his friend, poking Boris Zinovyevich in the back and the side. "Listen!"

Night was indeed over, but morning had not yet arrived. The first capercaillie was already heralding the dawn in song. It was somewhere very far away and it seemed to be stuttering with excitement, as if unable to say what it wanted. The forest repeated every sound it made, and listened, and waited for the king-bird to pour out his heart.

And others began singing to the right and left of the first bird. My goodness, what was going to happen now?

Boris Zinovyevich leaned on his gun and jumped to his feet. He seemed about to begin stuttering himself. How could he be tired if he couldn't feel his arms or his legs? He could only hear the birds teasing, calling, trilling. His heart began thudding in his chest and he could hardly breathe.

Boris Zinovyevich did not notice when his friend disappeared or in what direction. The shoot had begun. He waited for the moment and rushed forward. But where to? The sky in the east was barely detached from the earth and the fir-grove was as pitch-black as a cellar.

"Tk-tk-tk!" a capercaillie was calling him. This was evidently the nearest. It was somewhere close and seemed to be perched very low down. "Tk-tk-tk!" The cock seemed to be inviting him to play at blind man's buff. "Tk-tk-tk! .." But where was it? Boris Zinovyevich plunged into the dark fir-grove to meet his fate.

There were so many cocks calling for a mate that Boris Zinovyevich didn't consider it necessary to observe extreme caution. He ran towards the capercaillie's songs in great leaps, as is correct, only not in three, but in four or five in succession. When the trilling of the birds broke off, he froze, as is correct, but often after a delay. And if he stepped into hollow of melting snow or blundered into the remains of snowdrifts, he struggled and wheezed all of the time and even swore. It seemed to him that he had enough birds and was merely working out in advance how many he should bag. His self-confidence was letting him down again, but of this he was not aware.

The first bird did not wait to be shot. "Must have heard my heart beating," thought Boris Zinovyevich. The second detached itself from the tree when he was already cocking

the gun. "I should have done that earlier. Never mind. I'll get the third!" he decided.

At that moment, the taiga was split by a distant shot fired by his friend. "Oh, the devil, he's probably bagged one!" said Boris Zinovyevich with annoyance and envy, and he made haste. But where could he hurry off to? The bird calls had suddenly stopped everywhere. Boris Zinovyevich felt alarmed. Was it all over?

The forest had already acquired colours; trunks and their branches stood out against the dark, unrelieved green. It was possible to tell a spruce from a fir, and the stark, deciduous trees were prominent here and there—aspens, alder and birch. The sky was coming to life too, turning from pitch-black to the grey of wet autumn snow. The small scraps of pure blue between the clouds looked like melting patches in the snow.

Boris Zinovyevich lowered himself on to an old fallen tree-trunk and rested his gun on his knees with a sigh. He was tired now. But this mustn't be the end! Anything but go home empty-handed. He should bag not three, not two, but at least one of the devils! Only one, and he would be at peace with himself. Never again would he allow himself to be greedy; he must never count his chickens; it was better to want less, otherwise you didn't get anything at all. Not to overreach yourself, not to boast, not to promise yourself or others more than you were capable of doing—that was what he should have learned long ago.

"Devil take me!" he said considering his fate with despair. "What sort of a man am I? When will I ever learn? Do I really not know my weaknesses—no, my vices? I'm not modest. I'm always overestimating my chances. But modesty, that means being serious. I'm not serious. So what am I, after all?"

The bird calls renewed after five monstrosly long minutes. Boris Zinovyevich at once ruffled his feathers like a bird of prey—all was not yet over, all was not yet lost. Nearly bent double, he almost lay on his gun as if he wanted to curl up into a ball and disappear entirely. He listened so as to decide which cock was nearer and could be shot first. No, luck would not betray him. Everything would be as he had supposed. Everything was before him.

And he shot a capercaillie. Shot it.

But the bird did not fall.

And did not fly away.

It merely flapped its wings twice, shifted about on the branch, stepped across and seemed to cling more closely to the trunk.

Boris Zinovyevich had fired at close range, but the pine in which the cock was set was unusually high. Smooth, straight, with a reddish bark, it soared into the heavens like a brick chimney, and only high up did it branch out freely and widely. The bird was sitting in the tree-top as if enveloped in green smoke.

After a second shot, it shifted about even more vigorously, but again it did not fly away and did not fall. Boris Zinovyevich's hands and legs began shaking. "Isn't the gun working properly? Is the shot too small?" He hastily reloaded both barrels, took aim and fired them both at once.

The pine seemed to tremble. The bird never moved.

"That's a start!" said Boris Zinovyevich to himself. He was exultant. How was he to get the shot bird? Never mind how! Just get it!

He must climb up, as he had climbed many times in his boyhood.

True, the pine had no branches below, and it would take some time to climb that chimney-stack. But that was a mere trifle, it didn't matter.

Boris Zinovyevich went up to the pine and hit the trunk, first with his fist, then with his heel. He looked up into the tree-top and laughed. Not a single needle trembled on it. Only now did he realize that the capercaillie wasn't in his hands yet but somewhere in the sky, and he would have to put in some hard work to gain possession of it. He put the gun to one side, took the axe out of his belt and struck the haft of the pine. The tree responded reluctantly and dully to the blow. It was strong and thick—very thick. It would take more than half an hour to fell such a tree. An hour's work at least. Oh, and that wouldn't be easy. After a sleepless night, too. Wasn't it possible to think of something else?

Boris Zinovyevich looked round. There were other pines a few metres away, almost as tall, but also a little younger

and much thinner than this one. If he felled one of them, its top would dislodge the capercaillie. That would probably be best. Better not to think of anything. The axe was heavy, dammit. Perhaps heavier than the gun.

Boris Zinovyevich calculated the distance. He chose the easiest pine to fell, then walked round it, stamping his feet and flattening the thin suckers and the moss. Then he got ready for work.

He was prevented by a shot fired by his friend—it sounded self-confident, low-voiced and of course, it had gone home. Such shots do not ring out for nothing. "Another bag," thought Boris Zinovyevich. "Another ram brought down! "

He said this, realizing that he was wasting good shooting time. It was never too late to collect your bird, even if it meant coming for it on the next day; it wouldn't spoil. He must go after another. The mating calls were continuing; other birds were waiting for him. He notched several trees with the axe, made a note of them, undercut three or four firs near by and looked once more up into the top of the pine-tree. "Was it still sitting there? It was! " He left the axe in the roots and rushed off in the direction of his friend's shot.

Dawn was breaking.

Boris Zinovyevich did not get close to another capercaillie. He also failed to find his comrade. Two hours passed before, hardly able to drag his feet, he returned to his former spot. It was already warmer and the blue patches in the sky had spread out and brightened. There were many of them. Sometimes the sun appeared in those heavenly puddles. He could clearly see the big black bird in the tree-top. But, of course, it was dead!

Rust had already appeared on the blade of the axe, which was now cold and damp.

Boris Zinovyevich noticed that from four directions incisions, something like the feathers of four arrows, had been made in the trunk of the pine, which meant that here too they had been collecting turpentine. The first time, those arrows had been invisible in the darkness. He did not sit down for a breather, afraid that afterwards he would be incapable of work; time was already passing and he was hungry. He estimated once again whether the pine which he

intended to fell would reach the bird, imagining which way it would fall and how its branches would lash the old pine in which the bird was stuck. He decided that his guess was correct. Nothing was left of his self-assurance. Too quick and facile at self-encouragement, he no doubt just as facilely and easily succumbed to depression and became morbidly cautious and excessively circumspect.

It is impossible to forget how to use a gun, but it is not the same with an axe. Once he has learned to shoot, a man never loses his skill. It is not so with an axe; to wield an axe properly, it is essential to use it more or less regularly, just as practice is essential to a musician. Working with an axe demands muscular training as well as physical stamina. Firing a gun, on the contrary, demands no muscular effort.

Boris Zinovyevich's muscular powers had long since declined. What strength could he have if, from morning till evening, day after day, year after year, he had been sitting in an office? The only exercises for his hands were when he dialled a telephone number, which he did sometimes with his right hand, sometimes with his left. Oh yes, and sometimes he would bang his fist on the desk; but one is not supposed to do that often. Moreover, he would wave his hands about for an hour or two at a conference; but conferences too aren't held every day of the week. And waving one's hands about while making a report is not the same as wielding an axe.

Boris Zinovyevich had not been chopping for long when he broke into such a sweat that he had to take off his hunting jacket. It is disgraceful for a grown man, especially one raised in the country, to fell a tree for all the world like a beaver gnawing at a log. Boris Zinovyevich was trying to undercut the pine properly on two sides: the one on which it should fall, where the cut should be deep and as far as the centre; on the other, it should only be a secondary one, shallow, and just slightly higher than the main one. Boris Zinovyevich knew all this, but the axe was disobeying him, dancing on the trunk and not cutting, but merely ribbling at the wood. The flying chips were small and uneven! Disgraceful! But it was even more disgraceful that the pine, after being ribbled at on two sides, fell not where it should have done, but in the opposite direction. Boris Zinovyevich

applied his shoulder and tried to change the direction of fall. He even forgot that this could be dangerous. But all his efforts were in vain. Came the swish of the needles, like the wind, the crackle of branches, the soft thud on the ground, the soft echo in the depths of the forest and the air waves.

Now what? Boris Zinovyevich sat down this time. He sat down on the fir he had just felled. He would have even lain down and perhaps gone to sleep straight on the last year's blanket of moss. But he could not forget his job. He was late. And his position at work was not yet such that he could be delayed or not turn up at the office at all without consequences.

Resting his hands on the resinous trunk of the pine, Boris Zinovyevich bent over as if he were being choked by a cough. It was the pose of an asthmatic gasping for breath.

He had no hope of a rest, but at least he must calm down. What was he to do next? Give up the capercaillie and let it stay there like a scarecrow in a kitchen garden? No, not for anything! He would have to fell the next pine, but fell it properly, envisaging all possible eventualities.

And the axe began hitting and bouncing off again. The second pine, with the aid of which Boris Zinovyevich hoped to bring the bird down, was not thinner than the first and every bit as tall. It would take more than half an hour to deal with it, but there was no option. Of course, if he had the irons with which the electric linesmen climb up telegraph-poles, that would be the answer. But he had no such irons.

Boris Zinovyevich was hewing away and thinking about something. What? The fragments of thought did not remain in his memory. They flew past nervously, feverishly, to the thudding of the axe.

"I have no irons, of course. Where can I get them here? It's sometimes a good thing when there are no irons. No, it's better if there are some, but they oughtn't always to be shown. They should only be brought out in extreme cases. And if you've shown them and brought them out, then act! Irons or teeth? They say, 'You've bared your teeth, now bite.' To deal with you, I must sharpen my teeth first... Must cut more on this side; the pine should topple this way and fall. The cut looks like an open mouth. The axe bites

into the body of the pine. Or rather, tears it. The rust is gone. Ought to sharpen it. Don't bite unless you mean to swallow."

Another shot somewhere. But this one was too far away. "It can't be him firing. And if it is? Probably never imagined he would be so lucky, the devil. Still it's better when you don't make guesses, but simply act. Does that mean without a plan? Flying blind, playing it by ear? Get thee behind me, Satan, was I really on about that? But this is what I have in mind: fame comes to you between times if you've deserved it. I heard that somewhere or read it. Exact thought, stark logic, no poetry."

And the axe thuds, and thuds, and thuds! "Must swing it higher, bring it down harder, with a grunt: 'Huh! Ha!' Missed again! Just as long as it doesn't slip out of my hands. Even worse if the hands fly away with the axe. What drivell! 'Huh! Ha!'"

Boris Zinovyevich wiped his brow, straightened up for a moment and heard the echo in the forest—that was his axe thudding there—and resumed work.

"Seems all correct: the pine will fall right on to that big one and its top will hit the other one's. I did right to start felling this particular pine. I think there's another suitable pine on the other side that would also fall on my big one. If those ones are lower, then no point in touching them. Mustn't cut down just any tree. Not one after another. But if I've already started cutting, I must finish the job. And take the consequences. When you fell trees, the chips fly. If they were only chips. But when they're people? What kind of chips are they?"

The pine shuddered at last. Boris Zinovyevich also shuddered and, throwing aside his axe, pushed with all his might on the trunk, helping it to fall where it should. The pine started moving in the set direction, turning very slightly on its axis. Its summit described a semicircle and crashed against the trunk of the big pine, only at a place below the thick branches on which the bird was stuck. Lower! The bird stayed where it was, bolt upright.

"Oh, no!" wailed Boris Zinovyevich.

To whom was he wailing? About whom was he complaining?

"Oh no! You just wait! " he threatened.

Whom was he threatening?

He then acted like an automaton. He did not sit down and he did not have a rest. Time was getting on? Was that his fault? They'd be worried at work? Let them worry and let them wail! The sun was already past noon? Never mind, they could stick it out.

Boris Zinovyevich went up to the third pine. He was not the kind of man to give in. All right, then, he'd made a slight miscalculation, the pine had proved lower than he had supposed. Who doesn't have misunderstandings? Who doesn't make mistakes? However, the third pine was of almost the same height as the one with the bird in it. And, it seemed, no thinner. This time there would be no mistake. And the physical effort would even be useful. "We've been too sedentary, devil take us. Metabolism and so forth... A lot of things not quite right. Circulation sluggish. We can't see further than our own noses. And we boast, we boast! I've killed one and I can't get it. And it seemed as if I'd get three rams in the bag. And now look: the task is there, but no action. The goal is there, but where's the achievement? I'll have to buy a brace of capercaillies so as not to be ashamed. But I'd be caught out. A shame! I've been boasting. What will they say at home? And my comrades will laugh at me. Except that maybe they wouldn't dare..."

When the third pine was just about due to fall, his friend arrived. He was carrying dead game over his shoulder.

"What's this, Boris, switched over to lumber work? Fulfilling the plan?" And he laughed.

"Look at that damned bird! I'll just knock it down, and then we'll go."

The huntsman put down his birds and his rifle and surveyed the battlefield.

"I can't understand this at all," he said. "Is this the third pine you're felling?"

"Yes."

"But what for?"

"A miscalculation, the first didn't fall the right way and the second was a bit short. Help me so that there isn't another mistake."

"D'you need instructions?"

"Come on, come on, this is no laughing matter."

"Are you waiting for authorized instructions?"

"Guide-lines."

The huntsman walked round the glade, climbed over the fallen trunks as if they were antitank obstacles, reflected, and looked at Boris Zinovyevich in amazement and sorrow.

"Boris! " he said at last. "Look at this."

"Where?"

"At that pine."

"Which one?"

"The one with the bird in it."

"Well?"

"Can you see?"

"I can see. Well?"

"Now look at yours—the one you're felling."

"Well?"

"What d'you mean, 'well'? Are they identical?"

"Almost the same... In height, you mean?"

"And in thickness."

"Almost identical. What of it?"

The other was silent.

"Boris! " he resumed quietly. "Why have you cut down three pines? Let's cut this one down."

Boris Zinovyevich stuck the axe in the still living body of the pine and sat down near by. He was calmly silent for a long time.

"What of it?" he finally asked.

"D'you understand now?"

"I've understood for a long time."

"So what are you up to? Aha, you don't want to admit it?"

"No, I admit it..." said Boris Zinovyevich.

Then he rose to his feet, picked up the axe again and began hewing away. The pine trembled.

"Get back! " shouted Boris Zinovyevich. "Don't stand under the tree! You'll be crushed! "

"Are you out of mind, or what?"

The huntsman hastily grabbed his gun, picked up a stick, put it into the barrel of his gun, took aim at the bird and fired. The capercaillie slowly moved from its place and

landed heavily at his feet.

Boris Zinovyevich stopped hewing. He put on his jacket. He picked up his gun. He picked up his capercaillie.

And off they went.

“All the same, I worked hard! ” said Boris Zinovyevich. “What sort of sport is it if you don’t feel tired? It was a real shoot! ”

1960

Translated by Alex Miller

YURI KAZAKOV

(1928-1982)

Yuri Kazakov belonged to that generation of writers who, like Shukshin, Belov, Proskurin, and Bogomolov, made a start in literature at the end of the 1950s or early 1960s.

Kazakov was true to the national traditions of the Russian short story established by such masters as Leskov, Korolenko, Gorky and Bunin, whose influence on Kazakov's work is especially obvious. It was from Bunin that he learnt precision in genre and landscape painting, as well as discrimination and balance in constructing a story.

In his answer to a questionnaire put out by the journal "Problemy literatury" Kazakov said: "My experience, I suppose, is the same as

that of the majority of people my age. In my childhood and youth there was the war, a grim and hungry life, and after that came study, work, and more study... In short, a rather commonplace experience. But I am inclined to give preference to a person's inner biography... I believe that every writer who has the audacity to range himself with real literature, has a circle of problems which he engages in all life long. Happiness and its nature, suffering and release from suffering, moral duty to one's country, love, self-consistency, attitude to work, tenacity of foul instincts—these are some of the problems engaging my mind."

TWO IN DECEMBER

He waited for her a long time at the station. It was a frosty sunny day, and everything pleased him—the crowds of skiers and the crunch of fresh snow, which they had not time to clear away in Moscow. He was pleased with himself too—those strong ski-boots, woollen socks reaching almost to the knees, heavy sweater and Austrian peaked cap, but most of all the skis, splendid laminated skis with leather bindings.

She was late, as usual, and he used to get angry, but now he was accustomed to it, because, coming to think of it, this was perhaps her only weakness. Now, leaning the skis against a wall and lightly stamping his feet to keep them warm, he looked in the direction whence she was to appear and was quite calm. He wasn't joyful, no—just calm. It was pleasant and comforting to think that everything at work was going well and he was liked, that at home, too, all was well and the winter was fine—December, but it looked more like real March, what with the sun and the gleaming snow, and the main thing, he and she now hit it off together. That painful period of quarrels, jealousy, suspicions, mistrust, sudden phone calls and silences on the line, when you hear only the sound of breathing and it makes your heart ache—all this was now over, thank God. Now it was different—a calm, trustful, tender feeling.

When at last she came and he saw her face and figure close, he said:

“Well, well! There you are...”

He took his skis and they started off slowly, as she had to recover her breath, she had been in such a hurry. She wore a red cap, from under which tufts of hair escaped. Her dark eyes squinted and fluttered when she glanced at him, and her nose was peppered with the first tiny freckles.

He dropped behind a bit, getting small change out for the fare, and glanced at her back, her legs, and suddenly thought how beautiful she was, how well dressed, and that she was late because she probably always wanted to look beautiful, and that rebellious hair, seemingly accidental, was perhaps not accidental at all, and how touchingly preoccupied she was.

"The sunshine! What a winter, eh?" she said, while he was booking the tickets. "You haven't forgotten anything, have you?"

He pursed his lips. He had taken too many things, if anything, he was now thinking, because the rucksack was pretty heavy.

The train was crowded and noisy, packed with rucksacks and skis. Everyone was shouting, calling to one another, taking their seats amid a clamour and a clatter of skis. The windows of the carriage were cold and transparent, but the radiators under the seats diffused a dry warmth, and it was good to look at the sunlit snows outside the windows when the train started, and to listen to the quick soft clickety-clack of the wheels.

Twenty minutes or so later he went out into the vestibule to have a smoke. One of the side-doors had no pane in it, and a cold wind swirled round the vestibule, whitening the walls and ceiling, and there was a sharp smell of frost and iron, and the wheels did not click here, they thundered over the humming rails.

He smoked, looked into the car through the glass door, his eyes travelling from seat to seat, feeling a bit sorry for all these passengers, because none of them, he believed, would be so happy these two days as he would be. He looked at the girls, too, looked at their animated faces, and thought of them with a faint rueful excitement, as he always did when he saw lovely youth passing by with somebody else, not with him. Then he looked at her and was gladdened. He saw that even here, among these young and beautiful girls, she was better than any of them. She was looking out of the window, her face warm-tinted, her eyes dark, long-lashed.

He, too, started to look out of the paneless side-door at the frost, at the air, blinking from the blinding light and

the wind. Creaky wooden, snow-covered platforms flashed past. Some of the platforms had plywood buffets on them, all painted sky-blue, with an iron pipe on the roof and a sky-blue smoke trailing from it. And he was thinking how good it was to be sitting in such a bar, listening to the thin whistle of passing electric trains, warming oneself at the stove and drinking beer out of a mug. And generally, how fine everything was, what a wonderful winter, and what a joy that he now had someone to love. That the girl he loved was sitting in the car and you could look at her and meet an answering look. Wonderful wasn't the name for it—he ought to know, after all those lonely evenings he had loitered aimlessly about the streets with his friend, philosophizing, holding forth about the theory of relativity and suchlike pleasantly brainy things, and returning home a sad man. He had even started writing poetry, and his friend liked the verses, because he, too, had no one. And now his friend had married.

He was thinking—funny the way a person is made. Now take him, a lawyer, already thirty years old, yet he hadn't accomplished anything worth mentioning, hadn't invented anything, hadn't become either a poet or a champion, as he had dreamed in his youth. And how many reasons he now had for being sad, because he hadn't made a go of it, but he wasn't sad, his ordinary job and the fact that he had not made a name for himself did not sadden or horrify him in the least. On the contrary, he was now contented and calm and lived a normal life, just as if he had accomplished everything he had dreamt of.

One thing always worried him, though—the thought of summer. Already in November he would start figuring out and planning where to spend his summer holidays. Holiday-time always seemed to him to be so endless and yet so brief that one had to think it all out well ahead and choose the most interesting place so's not to go wrong. All through the winter and spring he kept worrying, tried to find out where the best places were, what the scenery was like, what sort of people lived there, and how one was to get there, and these inquiries and plans were perhaps more pleasant than the trip and holiday themselves.

Now, too, he was thinking of the summer, of going out

somewhere where there was a river. They would take a tent with them, come down to that river, inflate the boat, and it would become like an Indian canoe—goodbye Moscow then, the asphalt, and all those hearings and sitting about in legal advice offices.

He remembered the first time they had gone away together. They went to a tiny town in Estonia, where he had once been on business. The place had stuck in his memory, and afterwards he had gone there with her. He remembered the bus ride, their arriving at Valdai in the night, where everything around them was black, and the only sign of life was the lighted restaurant; how he had drunk a glass of vodka and became intoxicated, and how jolly he had felt in the bus, because she was at his side travelling with him, dozing in the still watches of the night, leaning against him. And how they had arrived at daybreak, and though it was mid-August and it had been raining incessantly in Moscow, here it was clear and bright, with the sun rising, with those white smiling houses, the red tiled roofs, the countless gardens, the brooding peace, and the quiet streets with curly grass growing between the stones.

They had rented a clean bright room, smelling strongly of *antonovka* apples which lay ripening everywhere under the window-sills, under the bed and in the wardrobe. There was also the rich Estonian market; they went there together and selected smoked pork fat, chunks of honey, butter, tomatoes and cucumbers—all at fabulously low prices. And that smell from the bakeries, the incessant cooing and wing-splashes of the pigeons. And she herself so unexpected, as if he had never known her, though she was already intimate and beloved. How happy he had been and there was probably still greater happiness in store, if only there was no war.

Lately he had been thinking a lot about war and hating it. But now, looking at the sparkling snow, at the woods and fields, listening to the hum and clank of the rails, he felt sure there would be no war, nor would there be death as such. Because, he thought, there were moments in life when a man couldn't think of its terrors or believe in the existence of evil.

They were nearly the last to get off at the distant station. The snow was crisp under their tread when they walked down the platform.

"What a winter!" she said again, screwing up her eyes. "We haven't had anything like it for ever so long."

They had to go a distance of twenty kilometres to his summer cottage, spend the night there, go skiing again in the daytime and return home in the evening by another railway line.

His father had a small garden and a board-built cabin with two beds, a table, a few stools and a German iron stove.

He put on his skis, jumped several times, slapped the snow with them, raising a flurry of snow dust, then checked her bindings, and they slowly started off. They had intended to go quicker, so as to get to the house in good time to have a proper warm-up and rest, but it was impossible to move fast in these fields and woods.

"Look at the trunks of those asps!" she said, stopping. "The colour of a cat's eyes."

He stopped to look too. So they were, those asps, yellow-green on top, just like the colour of a cat's eyes.

The woods were shot through by smoking slanting sunbeams. Here and there a snowsheet hung between the tree trunks, and the firs, relieved of their burden, swung their shaggy arms.

They went from slope to slope and sometimes looked down on white-roofed villages. Stoves were burning in all the cottages and the villages belched smoke. It rose to the sky in columns, which then mingled, floated apart, drifted and shrouded the surrounding hills in a veil of blue, and even at a distance of a mile or two from the village one could smell the smoke, and the smell of it made you want to get home quickly and light up the stove.

Now and then they crossed frost-hardened roads smoothed to a high polish by sledge-runners, and although it was December, there was something spring-like about those roads, about the wisps of hay, the transparent bluish shadows in the ruts, and it smelt of spring too. Once a black horse cantered along the road towards the village, its coat

glossy, its muscles rippling, ice and snow flying from under its hooves, and you could hear the crunchy tattoo and snortings. They stopped again to watch it.

Once it was a ruffled jackdaw, looking terribly preoccupied, that flitted past, with another close on its heels, while farther out a magpie, all agog with curiosity, swooped around, keeping an eye on the jackdaws all the time, anxious to know what it was they had found out. This, too, drew their attention. Or else it was bullfinches, exotic as tropical birds amidst this frost and snow, swinging, purring and pottering about busily on a thistle sticking up from under the snow, while the dry seeds were flicked over the snow from their thick strong beaks, forming a dark strip.

Sometimes they came upon a fox's tracks, which ran in an even but twisting line from hummock to hummock, then turned aside and disappeared in the snowy radiance. The skiers went on, and now they came across the tracks of hares or squirrels in the aspen and birch-groves.

All these signs of the mysterious nocturnal life, that went on in the cold wastes of field and wood, stirred the heart, made one think of the night samovar before the hunt, of the heel-length sheepskin coat and shotgun, of the slow-flowing stars, the black haystacks around which all these hares came out to feed at night, and where, at a distance, foxes came, sometimes standing up on their hind legs, sniffing the air. One could imagine a thundering shot, a flash of light and a brittle fitful echo in the hills, the barking of disturbed dogs around the villages and the glazing eyes of the outstretched hare, the hoar-frosted thick whiskers and the warm weight of the little carcass.

Below, in the valleys and ravines, the snow was deep and dry and the going was hard, but on the hillsides lay a *moiré* snow-crust with a light powdering of new-fallen snow, which made the ascent and down-run easy. On the distant hills along the skyline the woods glowed pinkily, the sky was blue and the fields seemed boundless.

And so they went along, climbing and sliding down, resting on fallen trees, smiling to each other. Sometimes he put his arms round her neck from behind, drew her down and kissed her cold lips. They hardly spoke, save for an occasional "Look! " or "Listen! "

She was sad and absent, though, and kept lagging, but he did not understand, he thought she was simply tired. He would stop, waiting for her, and when she caught up and looked at him with an unusual expression that held a sort of reproach, he inquired discreetly, well knowing how unpleasant such questions were to a companion: "You're not tired, are you? We can take a rest if you like."

"Oh, no!" she would say hurriedly. "I was just wool-gathering."

"I see," he would say, and continue on his way, but at a slower pace.

The sun now stood low, and only the fields on the hilltops still gleamed, while the valleys and ravines had long been blacked out, invaded by blue shadows, and through all that vast expanse of forest and field there moved two solitary little figures—he in front, and she behind, and he enjoyed the sound of the swishing snow under her skis and the clicking of the ski-poles.

Once, from out the pink radiance beyond the woods, where the sun had already set, came the rhythmic sound of throbbing engines and a minute later an airplane appeared high up in the sky. It was the only illumined object, with patches of sunlight spangling its fuselage, and it was good to look up at it from the frosty brooding silence below and imagine yourself one of its passengers, thinking of his journey's end, of Moscow waiting for him and the people who would come there to meet him.

At dusk they at last reached their destination. They stamped their ice-crusted boots on the cold verandah, unlocked the door and went inside. The room was quite dark and seemed colder than outside.

She lay down at once and closed her eyes. Flushed and hot from the run, she now began to cool off and a fit of shivering shook her body so that she was afraid even to move. She opened her eyes and saw in the dark the boarded ceiling, saw the flame burning up in the misted glass of the oil-lamp. She shut her eyes tight again, and instantly started floating amid a medley of shifting colours—yellow-

green, white, blue and red—all the colours she had filled her eyes with that day.

He carried firewood in from under the verandah, dumped it down by the stove, then with a clatter and a rustling of paper he kindled the fire, grunting. But she did not want anything, she was sorry that she had gone with him this time.

The stove got red-hot, it became warm in the room and one could undress. He did so, also taking off his boots and socks, and hanging them all up near the stove. He sat in his undershirt, contented, eyes ecstatically screwed up, wriggling his toes and smoking.

"Tired?" he asked. "Take your things off."

Sad and annoyed, she did not feel like stirring and wanted to sleep, but nevertheless she obediently took her things off and hung up her windbreaker, socks and sweater to dry. She was left wearing a man's checked shirt over the slacks. She lay down on the bed, relaxing her shoulders, and gazed at the lamp.

He slipped his feet into his boots, threw his jacket over his shoulders and picked up the pail which stood on the verandah. It gave off a sudden musical tinkle when he went out. Coming back, he put the kettle on the stove and began to rummage about in his rucksack, getting out everything it contained and laying it out on the table and window-sill.

She waited in silence for the tea, poured herself out a cup and then sat quietly chewing bread and butter, warming her hands on the hot cup, sipping and gazing all the time at the lamp.

"Lost your tongue?" he said. "What a day it was, eh?"

"I'm simply tired today, dog tired." She got up and stretched without looking at him. "Let's go to sleep."

"Not a bad idea," he agreed with alacrity. "Wait a minute, I'll put some more wood in. The place has gone cold."

"I'll sleep alone today. May I lie down here, next to the stove? Don't be cross," she said hastily, lowering her eyes.

"What's the matter?" he said, surprised, and all at once recollected how sad and remote she had been all that day. The recollection angered him and set his heart beating painfully.

Suddenly it was brought home to him that he did not know her at all—how she was studying in that university of hers, what people she knew and what she talked about. That she was an enigma to him, just as she had been at their first meeting, that he did not know her, and that she probably thought him uncouth and dull-witted, because he did not understand what she wanted, he could not keep her constantly happy with him so that she had no need of anything or anybody else.

And all of a sudden he felt ashamed of that whole day, of that wretched cabin that went by the name of summer cottage, of the stove, and even, for some reason, of the frost and sunshine, of his own peace and contentment. Why did they have to come here, what was the use of it all? And where was that vaunted accursed happiness?

“Ah well...” he said indifferently and drew his breath. “Lie wherever you want.”

Without looking at him, without undressing, she lay down at once, covered herself with her windbreaker and started looking at the flames in the stove. He went over to the other bed, sat down, smoked, then blew out the lamp and lay down. He was cut to the heart, because he felt that he was losing her. Somehow, happiness had eluded them, they had not been able to make a go of it. Why, he knew not, and the thought rankled.

A minute later he heard her crying. He sat up and looked at her across the table. It was fairly light in the room from the stove, and she was lying prone, gazing at the burning wood, and he saw her anguished tear-stained face, distorted and ugly from pain, her quivering lips and chin, her wet eyes, which she kept wiping with a slim hand.

Why, today of all days, was she so miserable, so unhappy? She did not know herself. All she felt was that the season of their first love was over, and now something new was setting in, and the old life had lost its interest for her. She was tired of being nobody to his parents, uncles and aunts, to his and her own friends, she wanted to become a wife and mother, but he did not see this and was quite happy as he was. Yet she was bitterly sorry for that first tremulous season of their love, when everything was so vague and indefinite, yet so strangely hot and full with the sensation of novelty.

Then she began to fall asleep and went off again, half-dreaming, on that flight of fancy with which she had always fallen asleep when a little girl. She pictured him, strong and brave. He loved her, and she loved him, but for some reason she always kept saying "No" and he went away, far away to the North-country and became a fisherman, and she pined all alone. He hunted out there among the sea-beaten rocks, leaping from rock to rock, composed music, went out to sea to fish and thought of her all the time. One day she realized that she could be happy only with him. She dropped everything and went out to join him. She was so beautiful that everyone paid court to her during the journey—airmen, chauffeurs and sailors—but she saw no one and thought only about him.

Their meeting was to be so wonderful, so thrilling, that it defined imagination. And she thought up ever new and new delays so as to put off that minute. At this point she usually fell asleep without having met him.

It was long since she had dwelt on such things at bedtime, but today she felt like giving herself up to dreaming again. And today again, just when she was going out in a motor-boat to join him, her thoughts grew confused and she fell asleep.

She woke up in the night from the cold. He was sitting on his haunches, relighting the stove, which had gone cold. He looked miserable, and she felt sorry for him.

In the morning they were silent at first, had their breakfast and tea in silence. But then they cheered up, put on their skis and went skiing. They climbed hills and slid down, choosing the steeper and more dangerous places.

Back in the cabin they warmed themselves up, talked about trivial matters, and about how it had been a wonderful winter after all that year. And when it began to grow dark, they packed up, locked the cabin and set out for the station on skis.

Their train approached Moscow in the evening. They were dozing, but when the big buildings came into view with their rows of lighted windows he was thinking that in a minute they would part and he suddenly imagined her as his wife.

Why not? The bloom of first youth had passed, the days when everything seems simple and optional—a home, a wife, family and what not—those days were gone, he was now thirty, and then there was that feeling when you know that she is with you and she is beautiful and all the rest of it, but you can always leave her and be with another woman, because you are free—a feeling in which, strictly speaking, there was no comfort whatever.

Tomorrow all day in the office, giving legal advice, writing appeals, drawing up statements, thinking of people's misfortunes, domestic ones included, and then home—to whom? And then the summer, the long summer, with all kinds of outings, canoes, tents, and again—with whom? He had a desire to be better, more humane and do whatever he could to make her happy.

But when they got out into the square outside the station with the lamps burning and the city noise all around them, and the snow already cleared away, they both felt as if their trip, those two days together, had never been, and that they now had to take leave of each other, part their separate ways; and meet again, maybe, in two or three days. They both slipped back into the groove of dailiness, they felt serene and calm, and said goodbye the way they always did, with a hurried smile, and he did not see her off.

1966

Translated by Bernard Isaacs

YURI TRIFONOV

(1925-1981)

Widespread recognition came to State Prize winner of the USSR Yuri Trifonov with his "city" stories: "Exchange" (1969), "Preliminary Summing-Up" (1970) and "The Long Farewell" (1971). He was concerned with urgent moral problems such as the day-to-day relations that develop in a family. Some critics reproached him for overemphasizing the details of ordinary life. In reply, Trifonov wrote, "Daily life is a great trial. It should not be spoken of with contempt as a lower aspect of human existence unworthy of literature. After all, daily life is ordinary life, a trial in which the new morality of today

is manifested and tested. The mutual relations of people are also part of daily life. We find ourselves in a bewildering and complex structure of existence, at the intersection of many ties, views, friendships, acquaintances, dislikes, psychologies and ideologies."

His short story, "The Winner", is aimed, to use the writer's own words, "against the bitterness of life, against the unfairness of fate, against ... goodness knows what else. Against death, perhaps. Against the ordinary mundane horror of nowhere and never with which we become reconciled and with which we live."

THE WINNER*

We hear the sound of the wheel-chair rolling over the parquet and the door opens. First, feet in cheque house-slippers appear, planted on the foot-rest of the chair; the legs become visible from the side, the socks are turned towards us, and we see the whole wheel-chair and a little old man sitting in it. Behind the wheel-chair looms the man with the moustache who had opened the gates for us. The old man looks at us unsmilingly, without saying anything. His bald head is lodged between the shoulders without the aid of a neck. It has, so to speak, sunk down into his shoulders and suggests a cork pushed deep into the neck of a bottle. There are squat, pot-bellied bottles stoppered with deep-sitting corks—iceberg-corks. It's hellishly difficult to draw one. In the end it crumbles, it gets pushed down inside and the contents are drunk, crumbs and all. It's as if the old man's head has a kind of continuation under the collar. In any case, we can't see his chin; it's somewhere down below, wound round with a foulard handkerchief. Apart from all this, the old man is totally bald. Moreover, not only is his head bald, his eyes are bald too, without eyelashes, and so are the hands lying flat on his knees; and when he smiles, we see his completely bald gums.

The man with the moustache nimbly and neatly tips up the chair to negotiate a small step on the threshold and pushes it forward with so gentle, calculated a movement that it glides over the floor to the middle of the room exactly.

"*Voilà*," says the man with the moustache, and he goes out.

Basil starts talking to the old man in French. He listens, nodding almost imperceptibly, from which it seems that his head is sinking even deeper down into his shoulders. He could probably hide his whole head down there. When he's weary of listening to Basil chattering beautifully in French, he'll say "Adieu" and retract his head like a tortoise.

Basil turns to us and explains:

"I said that we'd heard so much about him and we've come specially from Grenoble, and so on."

The old man mumbles something.

"He's glad to welcome you," says Basil.

Then comes another long sentence.

"He says he's always been interested in Russia. He had a Russian friend in Marseilles, a fine man who died of a fever... *La fièvre?*"

"Oui."

"Yes, that's it, of a fever."

The old man adds something.

"He died of a fever in Algeria," says Basil. "He wanted to go to Bulgaria, but he died."

"Who wanted to go to Bulgaria?" asks Boris.

"His friend. From Marseilles."

"Why Bulgaria?"

"What's it to you? Don't ask silly questions, we haven't got time!" says Basil rudely. "I don't want to go back at night. I've still got to refuel, bear that in mind."

I want to say, "You didn't have to spend such a long time at dinner, you damned greedy-guts", but I hold my tongue. We're his prisoners. Basil and I once lived in the same hostel, and they called him Vaska in those days, Potapych, or simply Ferret. He was thin and so was I, although we drank a lot of beer in a cellar on Neglinnaya Street. That cellar isn't there any more. Basil has already been here in France for six years. He works like a demented steam-hammer: I read his dispatches almost every second day. And he's become like a Frenchman; fat, harrassed and irritable, he's grown a short moustache, a real French moustache of the kind that was fashionable in the Twenties and has now reappeared, along with bell-bottomed trousers.

Basil read in the local paper that in the town of Couloz, not far from Grenoble, there lives an old man who took part in the 1900 Paris Olympic Games. He came last in the four hundred metres race; only what mattered wasn't his placing, but that he had competed and was still alive. Boris and I were dying to find this Methuselah, even if only to have a look at him. We persuaded Basil, who had an official car, to take us to Couloz. He held out for a long time, saying that he couldn't waste time on trivialities, that the President was expected to arrive in Grenoble almost any day and that he mustn't leave, and that petrol was so expensive now and that the whole scheme stank of cheap sensationalism. All right, ninety-four, all right, he'd competed in some kind of games, all right, so what? Point? Idea? If he had known Lafargue or heard Jaurès. Old age wasn't good copy, even as fantastically old as that; no one needed old age, like that failure who'd come last in God knows what year, when canvas aeroplanes were flying about and radio didn't exist yet. It then turned out that the President wouldn't be coming to Grenoble, that petrol wasn't so expensive after all, especially since the receipts were included in the expense accounts and were paid for in foreign currency, and that on the way to Couloz there was a lakeside restaurant famous for its fish soups and a particularly special wine. We left at twelve, at one o'clock we were by the lake, and after six, when it was already getting dark, we tore into Couloz. And here we are, sitting and staring at an old man whose head looks like a firmly depressed cork, and in his eyes, the weariness of a long life is as dark as water in a stagnant pond.

What can we talk to him about? He doesn't remember anything. Wars, deaths, illnesses, revolutions and holidays are all mixed up in his brain, which is already going dead and only responding at random, like a half-dead radio receiver in which all the valves have gone out of action except one. But I cannot catch what that brain responds to, what is alive in it, what it lives by. He remembers that the winners at the Paris Games were presented with umbrellas and walking-sticks as awards, that it was raining in the Bois de Boulogne, that there was an exhibition, and something else incoherent and vague. Names are mentioned haphazardly,

faces come up, but he is not sure that those faces were from there and not from somewhere earlier, or later, when he was lying in hospital; it was a hot summer's day, and a man had run past the window, shouting that a Russian had shot the President.

"Ask him about his attitude to the Dreyfus affair," says Boris.

Basil asks him.

"He's shocked," says Basil.

"Say that the best people in our country, Chekhov, for instance..."

"Ask him what he makes of the Anglo-Burian War," I say. "Will the English win?"

"What's his attitude to Maeterlinck?"

The old man's lips part, we see his bald gums again. Perhaps he's understood our joke, or perhaps he's smiling at some secret of his own. The man with the moustache comes into the room with a cut-glass decanter of whisky and four glasses. Basil and the man with the moustache begin an animated conversation, both laugh, talk loudly and, after each gulp of whisky, even louder. The man with the moustache guffaws... Basil pats him like an old friend on the stomach. Sometimes Basil explains something to us.

"This character, M'sieur Joseph, is the husband of the woman who looks after the old man... She gets four hundred and forty francs... It's hard work, because the old man is a... *salisson*?.. Ah, very slovenly, a real messer... He's all on his own, there were no children. People get slovenly with loneliness... M'sieur Joseph can't understand what we want with this old... *Marchand d'engrais*. Old dung-merchant? Perhaps not, old lavatory cleaner, that would be more exact... Incidentally, I don't understand what we wanted with him either. M'sieur Joseph has heard the story about the Olympic Games, but doesn't believe it; he thinks it's bosh, drivel—*les sornettes*. One can say anything. M'sieur Joseph works as a police-car driver..."

The man with a moustache is already red in the face, his eyes are squinting slightly, he has evidently drunk enough to last him a week. Moreover, he's not used to whisky without water or ice, and Basil, with his eternal haste and un-

ceremoniousness, has insisted on drinking like that, as quickly and as devastatingly possible. To Basil, with his experience of the cellar on Neglinnaya and two years wandering with expeditions round the Urals, all this, of course, is like water off a duck's back. He's a striking character, is our Basil! In his thirty-seven years he's already survived two heart attacks, one shipwreck, the blockade of Leningrad and the death of his parents; he was all but murdered somewhere in Indonesia, he made a parachute jump in Africa, has starved, has known poverty, taught himself French, swears like a trooper, makes friends with the avant-garde and, above all things, loves fishing on the Volga in summer.

Still smiling, the old man keeps repeating something senselessly but insistently. He reiterates the same sentence again and again, until Basil finally notices him.

"He says he's the winner of the Olympic Games."

"Which branch of sport?" asks Boris.

"All of them," says Basil, on hearing the old man's reply. "He once came last in the four hundred metres, but now he's the winner. They're all dead, but he's still alive."

I can see a light coming into the old man's eyes, a mad light. It's the valve still glowing in that nearly clapped-out radio receiver. The vanity of old age! The pride of Methuselah! To survive them all. To win in the great marathon of life: all who began that race with him, who laughed at him and hurt his feelings, joked over his failures, sympathized with him and loved him—they've all left the track. And he's still running. His heart beats, his eyes live, he watches us drinking whisky, he breathes the air of the damp February trees—the window is open, and if he turns his head he will see in the deep, densely blue rectangle of the evening a tiny, trembling star of silvery colour. Not one of those who once beat him can see that trembling, silvery drop, for they've all gone, have themselves been changed into stars, into damp trees, into February, into the evening.

"All you have to do is live long, that's all there is to it. You must live a long time!" says Boris as we go out of the house in Indian file through the dark over the stony road to the gates.

The man with the moustache sees us off, lighting our way with a torch. He and Basil talk in low voices. Basil translates: the man with the moustache has said that it is a very healthy, bracing climate here, and the old man has lived nearly his whole life in Couloz.

"One mustn't live too long," mutters Basil, opening the car door. "And that lad who won the four hundred metres seventy years ago—even if he did get killed later on somewhere near Verdun or on the Marne, at least he... But this one with the longevity of an elephant tortoise..."

Basil immediately accelerates violently, houses fly away behind us and so do the street lamps and the cars—two wheels on the pavement, two on the road—parked in the narrow street, and the town is already behind us. We are in the open, in the dark. Then a climb begins, turns, tunnels, the road along the lake is like a winding mountain road in the Crimea, but Basil steps on the gas without slowing down. We are hurled and banged against the sides of the car, we are silent, we are his prisoners. He switches on the radio and listens to a political broadcast; two persons talking in a low voice, with "Wilson", "Kissinger" and "Pompidou" occurring from time to time. In half an hour, having passed the twenty-kilometre-long lake, we stop on the motorway. We get out of the car. On the left is a mountain, on the right, a valley and lights. A naked country road, not a car, silence, cold, with night imminent. We stand some distance from one another under a sky which is astoundingly pale and dotted with stars. There is a smell of earth, petrol spilt on asphalt and a reek of burning, as of rotten sticks smouldering on a bonfire. They have lit a fire on the slope; it's a long way off, but the wind carries the smell to us. I feel chilled, I can't stop trembling all over. In the cold, after the drink, everything is damnably chilly. And I think that one might be a completely mad old man, alone, late in dying, no use to anyone, but able to feel—so intensely that one actually trembles—the smell of burnt branches being wafted over by the wind.

VICTOR ASTAFYEV

(1924-1984)

Victor Astafyev, State Prize winner, had two main themes—recollections of his childhood, and the Second World War. He had a miserable childhood, deprived of parental warmth and the security of a happy home. But living close to nature in Siberia and knowing its people somewhat alleviated the wretchedness of those years of orphanhood and for this he remained grateful all his life. Memories of childhood inspired his short novels "Theft " (1966) and "The Last Tribute" (1971-79).

The grim experience of the war also left an indelible trace in his soul. His stories on the subject ("Falling Stars", 1960; "Shepherd and Shepherdess", 1971; "Take and Remember," 1962; "When Fair the Day", 1967, and others) have an astonishing impact, and yet the tonality is so simple and undramatic, and the hero is so "mundane".

Astafyev's heroes perform their battle feats with the same thoroughness and conscientiousness with which in peace time they smelted steel or reaped wheat. They defend their home, their family, their country with conviction and a natural simplicity, and for contrast the author stresses the unnaturalness of destructive war against all living things, and speaks of the preciousness of human life with which nothing can compare in value.

The main hero of "When Fair the Day" hopes that people will not repeat the mistakes of the past "after such a butchery and self-extirmination... He believed, and his faith lent strength to himself and to all those men in the trenches, that fear, malice and hatred would be unknown to their children who would spend their lives doing only good, sensible things. After all, life was so short! "

*WHEN FAIR THE DAY**

The leaves were falling in town as well. Green leaves from the poplars, yellow from the lindens. The light linden leaves were being scattered about the streets and pavements by the wind, while the poplar leaves lay in still circles at the foot of the trees where they had fallen.

As he walked down the street, Sergei Mitrofanovich began to feel conscious of the noise his wooden leg was making in the soundfilled and yet hushed city. He walked slowly, trying to put the wooden leg down on leaves, but the tapping persisted as loud as ever.

Every autumn he was called from the little logging settlement where he lived to appear before a panel of medical experts, and every year the feeling of resentment ate a little deeper into his soul. This year it had reached such a point that Sergei Mitrofanovich, who had meekly endured all these quite unnecessary medical examinations since 1944, had finally asked the doctor:

"Hasn't it grown again yet?"

The doctor raised his head and gave him a displeased look.

"What did you say?"

Goaded on in a way he had never been before by accumulated bitterness, Sergei Mitrofanovich repeated, louder:

"Hasn't the leg grown again yet, I said."

The nurse, who had been filling in cards at the next desk, looked round and fixed a suspicious eye on Sergei Mitrofanovich, impressing him by her whole appearance that this was a place where people kept quiet, and that if he, a war-disabled out-patient, was drunk or simply out to make

trouble, she would pick up the telephone and dial 02. The militia had no sympathy with birds like him these days. "They'll soon put you in your place, my man. So you'd better behave yourself," she seemed to say. Gratified to see that the disabled veteran had lowered his head at once and did not know where to look or what to do with his shaking hands, the nurse swept the barn-like consulting room with the glance of conqueror.

"You can get dressed," said the doctor. He removed his glasses and started polishing the lenses with the hem of his gown.

Sergei Mitrofanovich's clothes and wooden leg lay in a heap in one corner of the room. As he hopped away between the desks, like a soldier running the gauntlet, the empty leg of his underpants lashed the chair legs and the worn strip of carpet between them. His body felt unbalanced without its usual counterweight and he was afraid of lurching over on to one of the desks, upsetting someone's inkwell and spoiling someone's white coat or polished desk-top.

He reached the corner safely, however, flopped down on a chair and looked round the room. The members of the medical commission were busy with their own affairs. They were a hard-boiled lot and no one had watched his precarious progress between the desks. The doctor who had been last to examine him was scribbling something on a form.

Sergei Mitrofanovich dressed, strapped on his wooden leg and walked back to the desk. The doctor was still writing. He stopped for a second, nodded to a chair and actually moved it towards the disabled man with his foot. But Sergei Mitrofanovich did not feel like sitting down. He waited patiently. What he would have liked most would have been to go out and have a smoke.

He stood thinking that as the years went by he saw fewer and fewer familiar faces among the disabled men summoned for the annual checkup. They were dying off but the rules were still the same. How many days were taken out of their already shortened lives by these commissions and checkups, by all this red tape and having to wait in queues?

The doctor put a full stop, blotted what he had written

with a sheet of children's light-blue blotting paper, and raised his eyes.

"Why don't you sit down?" he said, and added in a confidential, apologetic tone: "All this paper work, you know."

Sergei Mitrofanovich took the certificate, folded it in four and put it away in his wallet, awkwardly holding under his arm the new cap he had bought specially for this trip to town. Having disposed of the certificate, he put the cap on, but at once pulled it off again hurriedly, and made a respectful little bow.

The doctor gave him a gap-toothed smile in return and spread his arms, as much as to say, "What can I do? It's the regulations!" Sergei Mitrofanovich smiled back with forced sympathy, sighed, and walked out of the room, thankful that it was all over till next autumn.

Next autumn always seemed a long way off.

He could have his smoke now. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and started reproaching himself: "Once you had spoken up, you should have gone through with it. Regulations! If you, and someone else, and someone else besides, got together and put in a word in the right quarter, they'd soon change these regulations. They're not carved on rock, are they? And anyway, people move real mountains nowadays."

On the way to the station he bought three peaches in a plastic bag, then went into a help-yourself café, took two portions of sausages and a glass of fruit custard, and sat down at a table which instead of oilcloth had a perfectly smooth and clean plastic top with a web-like pattern of thin light stripes.

At the same table sat a girl with long straggly hair, who was also eating sausages and at the same time reading a thick book that seemed to be full of ruled lines, triangles and signs, and letters that were not from the Russian alphabet. She did not stop reading even while she was smearing mustard on her sausages, cutting them up with her knife and fork and washing them down with sips of tea from a glass, all of which she did without knocking over anything on the table. "Well, that one knows how to manage things!" Sergei Mitrofanovich thought in quiet surprise.

There were small striped lanterns hanging from the ceiling. The walls were light-blue and they, too, were covered in stripes going this way and that, and the flimsy curtains were also striped. The whole café was wrapped in a kind of light-blue twilight. A breeze stirred the curtains, fanning away the smell of cooking.

What a pretty little place!

"Enjoy your lunch, lass," he said as he rose to leave.

She tore herself away from the book and glanced at him absently.

"Oh... Thanks! I mean... Thanks! " And as an afterthought: "Good luck to you! " and again she buried her nose in the book, scraping at the now empty plate with her fork.

The café door was narrow and made entirely of glass. Two young fellows in identical, unseasonably light jackets opened it and made way for Sergei Mitrofanovich. But this only flustered him and in his haste he forgot to say thank you.

Out in the street the linden leaves were still whirling about. Cars glided past uncommunicatively. Trolley-buses with their windows still open as in summer went bobbing gently by. Children in uniforms that were still autumn fresh were on their way home from school.

Sergei Mitrofanovich stumped wearily into the booking hall of the station, bought a ticket and settled down on a massive bench to wait for his train.

A crowd of boys and girls poured out of a suburban train that had just come in. They were all wearing trousers, and identical jackets of some foreign make, and what with their short haircuts, there was no telling the boys from the girls. Some of them had perhaps a dozen mushrooms in their baskets, others even less. But they were all carrying armfuls of rowan branches and they all had dark, bird-cherry stains round their mouths. They made straight for the ice-cream stall.

Should he buy an ice-cream, too? Or, maybe, have a drink? But Sergei Mitrofanovich was afraid of ice-cream because of the sore throats he was always getting. He might get tonsillitis, then his heart, kidneys, liver, or God knows what, would start playing him up.

"That's the war, that is, still taking it out of you," his wife would say. As always, at the thought of his wife, he felt his heart soften, and furtively patted his jacket pocket. Panya always loved a present, whatever it was. And this time it was peaches! She had never tried them in her life. "Aren't they wonderful!" she would say. "They must have come from over the sea?!" Then she would put them away, and, later on, make him eat them.

The station was becoming more crowded. A group of recruits with cropped hair marched in escorted by an elderly army captain and their girlfriends, and occupied the free benches. There was not enough room for all of them and Sergei Mitrofanovich moved to the end of his bench to make more space.

Three of the lads dumped their things on the bench—a thin rucksack, a laced-up sports bag and a bag with straps, rather like a German field-bag but not so handy and all plastered with bright little pictures.

One of the boys, in a woollen track-suit, looked as if he were carved out of cedarwood. The second was as round and bright as the yolk of a hard-boiled egg. He kept tossing his head and reaching up as though he missed his forelock. The third was rather short with a big head, and seemed to be a quiet sort. He was wearing a grey wind-breaker, to which clung a curly-haired girl in a thin pink blouse and a short skirt with a slit at the side.

The first young man, so it turned out later, was called Volodya. He had a guitar and was obviously the leader. There was a girl with him, too, a well-fed lass, in light-blue slacks and a thick sweater that came half-way down her thighs. It had a wide neck, like a horse-collar, and her hair hung down over it in smooth bleached tresses. Everyone called the second boy, the ginger one, Yeska, though he insisted that his name was Yevsei. He had four girls with him, all to himself. One of them, judging by her colouring, was his sister, the others were probably her girlfriends. Yeska's sister was referred to as "transistor", probably because she chattered so much. Sergei Mitrofanovich had no difficulty in discovering the third boy's name, for the curly-haired girl in the pink blouse kept repeating all the time, with or without cause, "Slavik! .. Slavik! "

Among these lads, all apparently from the same block of flats or, perhaps, from the same college, there was one young fellow who seemed to have drifted into their company by chance. He was wearing a checked cap and a shirt fastened at the neck by a single brass stud, and he also had a raspberry-coloured scarf, one end of which dangled down his back. His face was shifty, his eyes sharp and intelligent, and Sergei Mitrofanovich spotted him at once as one of those artful dodgers without whom, for some reason, no group of Russians is ever complete.

The captain, having marched his squad to the station, kept himself to himself on one of the far benches, from which he could see everything and himself remain unnoticed.

The few parents who had come to the station hung about in corners with a lost air and quietly wiped away their tears. The lads were not very drunk but they made a lot of noise.

"Just been called up?" Sergei Mitrofanovich asked, to make sure.

"That's us! Raw recruits! " Yeska-Yevsei replied for all present, and waved to his friend with the guitar: "Volodya, come on--let's have a song! "

Volodya struck all the strings at once and the boys and girls burst forth:

*The Black Cat's a clumsy lout!
And life is one big roundabout!
But Blackie's luck is always out!*

And voices picked up the tune all over the hall:

But Blackie's luck is always out!

Sergei Mitrofanovich shook his head. "Young devils! " he thought.

Only Slavik and his girl did not sing. Slavik grinned sheepishly and the girl snuggled up to him under his wind-breaker.

The parents--rather ironically, to be sure--joined in the song about the black cat, and no one sobbed out that

plaintive old farewell song "*This My Last Day With You, Friends*". There were no accordions. The women did not wail, as they used to before the war, nor did the recruits rend their shirts and threaten to smash any enemy to smithereens.

From the "Cat" the youngsters went on to an altogether stupid sort of ditty. Volodya strummed away on the guitar and the boys and girls shuffled their feet and sang:

Chick-chick, cha-cha-cha!
Chick-chick, cha-cha-cha!

The words didn't mean a thing and there seemed to be no music either, but everyone enjoyed it. They laughed and shouted and jived about, and even Volodya's girl tapped one shoe against the other and, when her glassily shining hair dropped like a screen over her eyes, she would toss it back impatiently over her shoulder.

The captain had spread a newspaper on his lap and was eating tomatoes and bread, letting his boys have their fun. He raised no objection when the lads produced some vodka and started drinking straight from the bottle. The first to try it, of course, was the fellow in the checked cap. He was the only one who knew how to drink from a bottle; the others mostly played the fool, making terrible faces and merely shaking up the contents. Yeska-Yevsei took a swig and at once made a dash for the station's capacious rubbish bin, and tears ran from Slavik's eyes at his first gulp. This made him angry and he shoved the bottle into his girlfriend's hands.

"Here!" (The girl gazed at him with puppy-like devotion, not knowing what was expected of her.) "Here!" Slavik pressed the bottle on her with blind persistence.

"Oh, Slavik! .. You know I can't drink without a glass," she stammered.

"The lady requires a glass!" Yeska-Yevsei reappeared, wiping the tears from his face, which had suddenly turned grey. "Hey, there, look sharp!" he shouted an order to the lad in the checked cap.

The latter darted obediently over to Yeska-Yevsei's shoulder-bag, fished out a white plastic carton with a pic-

ture of a rosy-cheeked woman on the lid. Surely, that face on the label for Viola cheese looked like someone, or someone looked like her, Sergei Mitrofanovich thought, glancing round, and almost at once his eyes lighted on Volodya's girl—she was the one!

"Eat the cheese," Yeska-Yevsei commanded, "and give the container to the lady! Since she simply cannot..."

"Since she simply cannot drink without a glass!" the other chanted. Apparently they didn't care what they sang or how they sang it.

Volodya strummed away on the guitar but with rather forced enjoyment, and, though he pretended to ignore his girlfriend, his eyes roved in search of her, taking on a look of blank indifference as soon as they met hers.

"V-e-e-ry tasty!" the outsider in the checked cap bawled, sucking cheese off his finger, and added a dirty word.

"Hey, you!" Slavik turned on him sharply.

"Slavik! Slavik!" the girl beat on his chest with her fists, and he turned away, noticing that the captain was looking in their direction with a frown.

Meanwhile the carton filled with vodka was being passed round.

Volodya drank half the contents and bit a piece off a chocolate that Yeska's fiery-red sister had slipped into his hand. Then he held out the carton under his girlfriend's nose.

"You know I can't drink vodka," she said, frowning disdainfully.

Volodya stood holding out the carton. His cheekbones were hardening and his straight black brows were contracting over the bridge of his nose.

"Honestly, Volodya, darling... Word of honour!"

But he wouldn't badge and the girl took the carton between two musical fingers.

"Really, Volodya! It'll make me ill."

Volodya made no response. The girl poured the vodka angrily into her painted mouth. The other girls clapped. Volodya pushed the rest of the chocolate into her open mouth, roughly, like a gag, and strummed ferociously on his guitar.

"Things don't look too good for you, my lad. Looks as

if she was brought up on brandy, and you're forcing vodka on her," Sergei Mitrofanovich was thinking, when someone tugged at his sleeve. It was Slavik's girl. She was offering him the carton.

"Please, drink to our boys... And ... and to everything! " She buried her face in her hands and fell, stem-broken, on her Slavik's chest. He took her under his windbreaker and, forgetting himself, began to soothe and rock her.

"Ah, you little wag-tail!" Sergei Mitrofanovich murmured to himself. He rose from the bench, pulled off his cap and dropped it on the seat.

Volodya muffled the strings of the guitar. Yeska-Yevsei, looking quite squiffy by now, put his arms round his sister and all her girlfriends in one huge embrace. He was the kind who made friends with everyone, but never close friends. The time would come when some iron-fisted woman would get hold of Yeska-Yevsei and bully him for the rest of his life, fully believing that she had saved him from waywardness and destruction.

"Well, young people..." Sergei Mitrofanovich began, and cleared his throat. "Well, now... May the kiddies never be afraid of thunder! How's that?" And with an effort he drank the vodka from the carton, in which white rags of cheese were still floating. He even affected a grunt of pleasure, to the delight of that artful one in the cap.

"That's the stuff! That's a soldier for you!" he exclaimed, and in a confidential, man-to-man way nodded at the wooden leg: "Where did they chop your leg off?"

"At the war, boys, at the war," Sergei Mitrofanovich replied.

He preferred not to talk about how and where his leg had been blown off, and so he was glad to hear a voice on the loudspeaker announcing that his train was in. The subject of his leg was dropped automatically.

The captain rose from his distant bench and ordered his party to follow him.

"Come on, Dad, you string along with us! " Yeska-Yevsei shouted. "We're going to have fun! " he added, clowning and putting on a country accent. "It'll be fathers and sons! As contemporary literature asserts, no conflict exists between the two..."

"Educated young brats!" Sergei Mitrofanovich reflected. "Plenty of patter! Our old sergeant-major couldn't have handled 'em. They'd have him in fits with their humour alone..."

*Dearly recall,
Await him through all,
The soldier who's gone to war...*

They were singing properly now, without any clowning, these boys and girls that he was limping after. They all had their arms round one another, except Volodya's girl, who walked along by herself, swinging the laced sports bag, and Sergei Mitrofanovich sensed that if only decency had allowed it, she would gladly have skipped this last stage of the leave-taking and said her goodbyes then and there.

Volodya punched away at his guitar and didn't give her a single glance.

Sergei Mitrofanovich spotted a kiosk on the platform and stumped towards it on his wooden leg.

"Where to?" Yeska-Yevsei called after him.

Sergei Mitrofanovich made signs that he would be coming in a moment.

At the kiosk he bought two bottles of foreign Vermouth. There was no other wine except Champagne and he refused to spend money on that stuff.

He boarded the train. What with the smoke, the hubbub and the laughter, he was a little taken aback, but the sight of the captain had a reassuring effect. The captain was seated near the attendant's compartment, thumbing through a newspaper, again with a full view of the carriage.

"Army friendships are lasting!" the young men were barking at each other in the corridor, as they clinked glasses.

"Yes, but a bit too long sometimes!"

"What, kissing again! Too short the night, eh?"

And they struck up that poignant old favourite:

*Too short the night,
The clouds are asleep...*

"You don't know what army life's like yet, boys! " Sergei Mitrofanovich thought to himself with a chuckle. "You don't know anything yet. Wait till you get there! The captain's just giving you a bit of rope to start with. But he'll put the screws on out there! Tighten them up properly, he will! "

The old front-line song had stirred up memories and he hurried to join his young acquaintances, so as not to get depressed.

"Volodya! Yeska! Slavik! Where are you?" Sergei Mitrofanovich paused and listened as if he were in a forest.

"We're here! " came a voice from behind a partition.

Sergei Mitrofanovich squeezed his way along the tightly packed corridor. "So, here you are."

"Well, young soldiers! This is from me, to send you off with! " Sergei Mitrofanovich plonked one bottle down on the table.

"Why did you spend all that money?" they all protested at once, except for that one outsider, who had, of course, already grabbed the window seat, topped himself up with a few more drinks and now had his cap right over his eyes and his scarf on the peg over his head, asserting that this place was his and his alone.

"That's the idea! " he approved Sergei Mitrofanovich's action, and grabbed the bottle. "Now we'll open her up! "

"Who's got a cork-screw?" Yeska's sister cried above the din.

"What do you need a cork-screw for? You're living in the past! " The artful fellow winked at her and, like a squirrel stripping a nut, ripped off the foil cap with his teeth and pushed the cork into the bottle with his finger.

Well pleased with himself, he surveyed the company and again winked at Yeska's sister. He was making up to that girl, but she shrank away from him with poorly concealed distaste. And when at last he did manage to get an arm round her, she told him sharply;

"Keep your dirty paws off me! "

He did take his arm away but ignored the snub and, as though by accident, put his hand on her knee, then even higher, until finally she moved away from him to another seat.

The loudspeaker on the platform announced: "Train No. 54 is leaving in five minutes. Passengers are requested..."

Sergei Mitrofanovich and the lad in the cap were pushed aside as all the boys and girls jumped up. Yeska-Yevsei hugged his sister and her girlfriends. They were crying and laughing at the same time. So was Yeska. The girl in the pink blouse clung to Slavik like grim death and looked as if she would never let go. Big, babyish tears rolled down her already tear-stained face and left grey marks on her blouse. Her eyes were made up Japanese style and the black was running.

"Don't bawl, kid! " Slavik mumbled, and shook her by the shoulders to bring her to her senses. "You promised you wouldn't cry..."

"Boo-hoo... All right, I won't... Boo-hoo..."

"Hot stuff! " the lad in the cap chortled. He was now isolated from the rest of the company. "Aha, what's she been up to ... getting wet, ain't she?"

But Sergei Mitrofanovich was not listening to him. He was watching Volodya and his girl, and he felt sorry for Volodya.

"Well, do your service, Volodya. Guard the Motherland..." She pecked Volodya's cheek with her painted lips and stood there, not knowing what else to do, flicking back her bleached hair fretfully.

With his arm resting on the upper bunk, Volodya stared morosely out of the window and said nothing.

"Write me a letter if you feel like it, Volodya," she said, and turned to the crowded corridor. "What a horrible din! .. And they all reek of hooch! "

"Enough! " Volodya snapped. He turned her round and steered her out of the carriage, shouting over his shoulder:

"Enough! Come on, chaps! "

The boys and their girls moved towards the exit, all except Slavik's girl. She suddenly sat down on one of the seats.

"I won't go! "

"What's this? Why?" Slavik swooped on her like a hawk. "Disgrace me, would you?"

"All right. I will..."

"Got a bun in the oven, she has! That's for sure! You'll

have a little soldier-boy waiting for you when you come back, Slavik! ” the artful dodger commented, wriggling in his seat. “Or a little soldier-girl! ”

Sergei Mitrofanovich put his hand on the girl's drooping shoulder. “Go along, dear, go along. Say goodbye properly. Or else you'll cry all those precious minutes away, and regret it afterwards.”

Slavik glanced gratefully at Sergei Mitrofanovich, and piloted the girl out of the carriage, holding her as if she were ill.

“It's always the same. At all times, always the same,” Sergei Mitrofanovich thought sadly, chin in hand. “Partings and tears, partings and tears...”

“What about a drink while the cats are gone?” the lad in the cap suggested. He was depressed by his isolation, and rubbed his hands as if he felt chilly.

“When we drink, we'll all drink together.”

The train started. Slavik charged in, scrambled on to the little table and pushed his big head between the narrow sliding panes of the window.

The train was getting up speed and, just as in times past, the girls and the mothers were running after it, and the fathers and grandfathers were waving on the platform; but the train moved faster and faster. Yeska's sister hurried after it with her red hair flying and shouted something as she ran. Volodya's young lady took a few steps beside the carriage and halted, waving her hand smoothly, like a swan's wing.

Slavik's girl kept up the chase longer than anyone. Her tight short skirt hampered her and she staggered as she tried to catch Slavik's outstretched hand.

“You'll fall! You'll fall, I tell you! ” Slavik shouted from the window.

The train rumbled over the points, swung round a curve and the girl flew out of sight, like a pink-breasted bird.

Slavik hung sack-like out of the window, his arms dangling, his head thumping against the thick frame.

The boys sat in their seats, subdued and quite different from what they had been on the platform. None of them spoke. Even the lad in the cap had fallen silent and stopped wriggling.

The train attendant appeared and started sweeping up and grumbling. Tobacco smoke floated out of the windows. The carriage wheels counted the ribs of the bridge as the train crossed the river. The wooden houses of the suburbs stretched along the line, gradually melting away among woods and coppices. The train ran on without jerks or whistles, at the same steady speed, as though it were flying low over the earth, its business-like clickety-clack putting its passengers in the mood for a long journey.

"Slavik! Slavik!" Yeska-Yevsei remonstrated, tugging at his friend's trousers. "Are you going to stay like that till we get there?"

Slavik manoeuvred himself back through the window, squeezed into a corner and pulled his windbreaker over his head.

Sergei Mitrofanovich bestirred himself, picked up the bottle and, looking round for the empty cheese carton, said:

"Why are you all so down in the mouth? You're not going to your deaths, are you? Not to war? Come on, let's have a drink. We'll talk and have a song, maybe. I don't know your "Black Cat", but I'll sing you my favourite."

"Well, why not?" Yeska-Yevsei also made a move and pulled the windbreaker off Slavik's ear. "Here, you, what about it? Volodya! Boys! Someone's made us an offer. And he's an old chap, you know..."

Sergei Mitrofanovich looked at Slavik and gave a sigh, "Never mind, boy. It'll all pass. It's not the troubles behind you that matter, it's the ones ahead."

"Let him be for a while," he said to Yeska-Yevsei and, having found the now cracked and crumpled cheese carton, added, louder: "May you have a good sergeant-major."

"Wait a minute!" It was Volodya, who had just come out of his trance. "We've got mugs and spoons, and things to eat—we've got everything. We were just showing off at the station." He gave a dry, sober little laugh. "Let's do the thing properly."

Now they drank and talked in a normal, human fashion. The experience of parting had made them more congenial.

"I want some, too!" Slavik poked his head out from under the windbreaker. Snatching the carton and spilling

most of its contents, he gulped the rest back, then threw the carton aside angrily and pulled the windbreaker over his ear.

The boys again started asking Sergei Mitrofanovich about his missing leg. Appreciating their friendliness, he told them how his battery had faced a sudden tank attack in a forest, before they had had time to prepare for action. The forest was tall, Carpathian pine, and the trees in the firing area had to be felled during the battle. Two gun-crews were detailed to do the felling, while the other two swung the howitzers into position. The observation post on the edge of the forest kept hurrying them on, but the pines were thick and there were only two saws and four axes altogether. They worked stripped to the waist, sweating despite the cold, while a stream of threats and curses came over the line from the observation post.

The curses ended in a howl: "Tanks very close! They'll crush us! Open fire! "

It was impossible to open fire without felling another five or so of the pines in front of the guns. But in war the impossible often had to be made possible.

They opened rapid fire.

A shell from the gun commanded by Sergei Mitrofanovich hit a tree, the gun-crew perished under the short-tailed howitzer, which had been overturned by the explosion, and their commander, who had been standing a little further back, was flung into the air.

He woke up in hospital with one leg missing, stone-deaf and unable to speak.

"And that was the end of the war for me, lads."

"Well, what do you know! And we thought..." Yeska-Yevsei began.

Slavik showed his nose from under the windbreaker and stared at Sergei Mitrofanovich. His tear-swollen eyes had sunk deep into their sockets and his head seemed even bigger than before.

"You thought I lost it blocking an enemy firing slit, eh?"

"What about your wife? Did she take it all right?" Volodya asked. "After you were wounded, I mean."

"Of course, she did. Came to the hospital to fetch me. All in proper style." Sergei Mitrofanovich glanced keenly at Volodya.

It had never entered his head that Panya might have rejected him. And in hospital he had not heard of anything of the kind either. Even the "samovars"—the men who had lost both arms and legs—had never talked in that vein. Maybe they had kept their thoughts to themselves?

"A woman, our Russian woman, can't leave a disabled husband in the lurch. She may leave a healthy one, she can have a fling while her husband's away, but she can't leave a cripple or an orphan! Never! Our women have their hearts in the right place, and always will have! And you, young men, you mustn't think badly of them. That girl of yours," he turned to Slavik, "she'd go through hellfire for you."

"Let me kiss you!" Slavik roared drunkenly and squeezed in beside Sergei Mitrofanovich, who felt an impulse to stroke the boy's head but didn't dare.

"Well, lads," he mumbled huskily. "What about a song? What do you say, chief?" he asked, addressing Volodya. "There aren't any babies in the carriage, are there?"

"No, we've got nearly all the carriage to ourselves," the recruits clamoured. "Come on, Dad, let's hear you!"

By the lads' voices and smiles Sergei Mitrofanovich guessed that they thought he was very drunk and were expecting him to come out with some corny old "Oh, rowan-tree, my lovely rowan-tree," or "A machine-gunner I was born and a machine-gunner I shall die!"

He glanced at them out of the corner of his eye and smiled slightly to himself, then began to sing softly in a deep, sonorous voice that he hadn't lost as song-leader for his company in the reserve regiment, despite the frosts:

*When fair the day,
Or gloomy the night...*

The grins vanished at once. Confusion and a new attentiveness appeared on the lads' faces. Just as intimately, as though absorbed in some discourse, Sergei Mitrofanovich went on:

*Always of you
Are my thoughts
And my dreams...*

At this point he half-closed his eyes and, with his hands folded over his knees, sat leaning slightly forward and swaying with the movement of the train, very, very softly now, as though playing on some inner string and, checking the cry that was about to burst from his breast, he concluded the song:

*Who will caress you?
Comfort and love you?
Call you his darling, his own?..*

From his voice, untainted by drunken peasant wildness or by the oversophistication of the highly trained, one could tell his character, the gentleness and cordiality of his nature. He revealed his whole self because there was no dross in him, no darkness, no hidden corners. Listening to Sergei Mitrofanovich, one was no longer alone, one felt the need for brotherhood, one wanted to be loved and to love others in return.

The man sitting before the lads was no longer a cripple with a wooden leg, dressed in an old-fashioned jacket and blue high-necked shirt. The receding hairline, the greying temples, the wrinkles that were so out of keeping with his youthful face, the chapped and blackened hands had faded into the background.

Before them was a young, gallant gun commander with a row of medals on his chest.

And he himself, as soon as he began to sing that song, which he had heard once on a record and now sang in his own way and with many of his own words, also saw himself back in the family of his gun-crew—young and healthy, with a thick forelock, respected not only for his singing and his easy-going nature.

...Clickety-clack went the wheels. Sergei Mitrofanovich had finished his song and was still sitting in the same position, with his wooden leg stretched out under the table, and his hands, so unlike his voice with their nicks and

scars, still resting between his knees. His face now was a little paler, the stubble was showing under his lower lip and his eyes were far away.

"That was something," Yeska-Yevsei murmured, and shook his head as if to throw back an unruly lock of hair. Redheads are usually curly.

Noting that the artful fellow in the cap was about to chip into the conversation and knowing in advance what he would say ("We had a bloke in reform school who could also do a marvellous croon about love and parting"), Sergei Mitrofanovich looked out of the window and slapped his knees.

"Well, boys, I'm getting near my stop." He smiled shyly. "The songs and the talk made the journey pass quicker. Let's say goodbye." As he rose to go, he felt something weighing down his pocket. "Why, I've got another bottle here! Can't you use it? I don't want any more."

"We don't need it. We've got plenty," Slavik said, staying his hand. "We've got money and drink. Take it home with you."

"Well, it's up to you. All I wanted..."

"No, thanks," Volodya supported Slavik. "Our best regards to your wife. She must be the right kind of woman."

"You don't need to tell me that," Sergei Mitrofanovich replied simply and, to put the lads at ease, added: "We've got a chap who works in the steaming shed and he's always bragging, 'Look at me! Here am I living with my fifth wife, and never gave one of them cause to complain.'"

The lads laughed and followed Sergei Mitrofanovich down the corridor. At the door they lighted up and smoked. The brakes screeched and the train stopped at a small station with tall misty firs towering all round it. There were even fir-trees growing in the station square. An old piebald horse, tethered by a long rope, was grazing near one of them.

Sergei Mitrofanovich lowered himself carefully from the carriage step and steadied himself on the greasy trampled ground, through which the gravel showed in places. The train, as though this was the moment it had been waiting for, moved off almost at once. Sergei Mitrofanovich raised his cap.

"May you serve in peace, lads! "

They were grouped closely behind the train attendant, watching him. The train picked up speed and the locomotive thudded away into the dense firs beyond the station. Then the carriages, too, drummed over the points and soon only the current collector was visible above the trees, striking blue sparks from the damp overhead wires. When the last carriage had disappeared and all was quiet, Sergei Mitrofanovich repeated:

"May you serve in peace, lads! "

That was how those young servicemen would remember him—standing on his wooden leg, his hair streaked with grey, his long jacket weighed down by the bottle in one pocket, and behind him, a little station called Fir Halt.

There were no lorries going his way, and so Sergei Mitrofanovich had to foot it all the four familiar but long kilometres home.

Fir Halt dropped away behind him, and the firs too. They formed a wall round the station and beyond them were clearings and wasteland, where even the snow fences were made of lopped firs and the ground under them was dark and damp.

In the autumn of 1945 the new timber had just been springing up on the clearings and everywhere there were marshy patches dotted with red cranberries and cowberries. Here and there stood hay ricks of various sizes with sagging backs, like aged horses.

It had been a better autumn than this. The sky had been wider, the distant horizons shimmered sunnily, and a spring-like mist clung to the earth. Or perhaps everything had seemed brighter because he was on his way home from hospital, from the war. Every blade of grass, every bush, every bird, every beetle and ant had been a joy to him. After lying in bed for a year, deprived of memory, hearing and the power of speech, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of the world that had just revealed itself to him again. He still could not recognize everything, his hearing was impaired and his speech was halting. If Panya had not been warned about it by the doctors, she would have thought he was not all there.

He would catch sight of the creeping thistles on the fringe of a wood, then notice the hawkweed, the goat's beard, the nipplewort and the stick-tights and would be upset because he could not remember their names. They all had yellowish flowers and apparently his memory, as it then was, could not distinguish between them.

"Dandelion! Dandelion! " he would give a sudden shout of delight, and plunge into the thickets on his crutches. He got tangled and fell over and, lying on his belly, picked the scraggy flower and started smelling it.

"So you know a fall dandelion when you see one, do you?" Panya said as she brushed the cobwebs off his face. He could not feel cobwebs yet and was still oblivious of smell.

He would stop beside a rowan-tree and stand staring at it, trying to make out what had happened to it. The stems were there, but no berries.

"The birds have pecked them out," Panya explained.

"Ah, the birds! " he said, beaming happily. "The woodcocks?"

"The woodcocks and the thrushes. All birds like berries. You know that! "

"Ye-yes."

"You don't know anything any more! " Panya murmured sadly to herself, remembering her last talk with the head doctor. He had explained patiently and at great length how to tend the sick man, what he could eat and drink and how he must be spared any nervous strain, and all the time he had inquired casually about their children. And she had replied in confusion that they had wanted to wait a bit, and then the war came... "But why worry? We're still young..." "What a pity! " the doctor had said, avoiding her glance, and after that their conversation flagged.

Only on the road from the station to the settlement had she grasped the full import of the doctor's words, the cruel truth behind them.

But Sergei gave her no time for grief and reflection. When they came to a stream he attacked the bird-cherry, grabbing it in handfuls.

"It's sw-sweet! "

"It's good and ripe. Of course, it's sweet! "

He stared at her. It was only about three months since he had began to distinguish sweet, sour or bitter. Panya had no idea what that meant. Few people had. A sickly look came into his face and Panya realized that his shell-shocked brain was tired. Once more, but without much persistence he pointed out to her the wild hops twined round the bird-cherry.

"It was a hot summer," she explained wearily. "That's why there are no cones. They're all stem and leaf this year. Hops need moisture."

He hung limply on his crutches and she regretted that she had let him have his way and not ordered a cart. They frequently sat down to rest by the haystacks. He would take a wisp of hay in his hands, squeeze it and smell it, and his eyes would brighten. Apparently he could catch the smell of hay.

The aftergrass was fresh and green on the mown patches. The rattle-boxes displayed their faded blossoms and pale-pink knobs of late clover showed here and there. The sky, bleached at the edges, was calm and clear. Its ghostly stillness promised frosts.

As they drew near the settlement Sergei stopped asking questions and heaved himself along desperately, though he often had to stop.

The settlement with its fringe of desolate vegetable patches looked naked and forlorn amid the ornate forest. The houses had blackened with age and there were not many left. The young forest was creeping up to their walls. The settlement was overgrown and half-deserted. There was no noise, no bustling life. Not even the sound of children. Only the chug-chug of the power-generator in the background and the smoke rising from the charred workshop chimney asserted that the settlement was still alive and working.

"M-m-mum?" Sergei stammered, turning to Panya.

"She must have stared her eyes out by now, watching for you. Let me give you a hand up the hill. Come on, dear! "

She took her husband's crutches, and practically carried him up the hill, but at the top she gave the crutches back and they walked down the street side by side in the proper manner.

"Our darling boy! " Panya's mother burst out into a wail as she saw them. "What have they done to you, those German butchers! "

She loved her son-in-law as much as her daughter, and showed her affection for him more. Now he stood before her, thin and pale from lying in a stuffy ward for so long, like a sprouting potato from the cellar.

"Are you going to stand and look at each other for ever?" Panya snapped.

The old woman kissed her son-in-law with faded lips and complained as she helped him up the steps: "She's been giving me an awful time, she has, the witch. It's a good thing you're back home." And her lips quivered.

"Stop pestering my soldier, will you! " Panya protested with her usual domestic condescension, surveying her mother and husband, who had once again formed the unspoken alliance they had maintained before the war.

Whenever he had to walk from Fir Halt to the settlement alone, Sergei Mitrofanovich would relive his return from the war.

The spruce, the firs and newly sown pine and larch were now beginning to rear their dark shapes above the broad-leaved timber. But the lindens were pushing their way up to beat the conifers, twisting their branches, bending their black trunks, but not yielding an inch.

There were not so many ricks in the clearings because the trees were encroaching now on the mowing patches. But the bogland was a different matter. The trees there wilted and died before their roots could take a proper hold.

The late mushrooms on the hill slopes had been touched by the morning frosts and their caps were leaning over. The frost-nipped bird-cherry and rowan were shedding their berries into the tiny forest lakes.

One day they would start felling again round Fir Halt, but meanwhile they were only chopping down the old birch-groves. Before the war no one ever cut down birches. When the conifers had been felled, they had switched over to producing bast and plywood.

Sergei Mitrofanovich was a saw-setter, and Panya worked in the wet shop, where the birch stumps were soaked in

hot water, then rolled out like paper, the hard cores being thrown out for firewood.

Sergei Mitrofanovich turned off the road on to a path and followed the bank of the little river Karavaika. At one time the grayling had bred there, but the loggers had polluted the water so badly that the river had died. It was clogged with rotting logs, stumps and workshop waste. The bridges had sunk and were overgrown with grass, and the only creatures that could flourish here were grass snakes.

The path wound up from the river to the allotments, from which the potatoes had already been harvested. Music was coming from a loudspeaker mounted on the club building. Sergei Mitrofanovich stopped to listen. The song was not Russian. At first he thought it was a woman singing. When he reached the allotments he realized it was a boy, and that boy was singing as no boy had ever sung before.

He imagined the boy singer seated on the bank of a river, tossing stones into the water and thinking and talking to himself of what he saw and thought, and for all their childish simplicity those thoughts revealed a very deep and ancient sorrow.

The boy was imitating his elders. But even in his imitation there was unfeigned sincerity, a childish trust in his pure and as yet unbesmirched world.

"I wonder what country you're from, sonny?" Sergei Mitrofanovich murmured. He tried hard to make out the words but it was no use, and still he felt worried about the boy. He was sure something terrible was going to happen to him, that he would call down some disaster on himself, and Sergei Mitrofanovich tried to breathe as quietly as possible, so as not to miss the moments when he could help.

He did not know that the boy was already past helping. The boy had grown up and vanished like some outmoded trinket on the junk-heap of the pop-music market. Fame had burst into his life like a lightning flash, and died away for ever in the brief memory of the public.

The club radio began to talk, but Sergei Mitrofanovich still stood with his elbow resting on the wicker fence, and for some reason felt sad and guilty towards this boy

singer, and towards the lads who had gone off to serve in strange parts.

Because Sergei Mitrofanovich had no children of his own he felt that all children somehow belonged to him, and he was always anxious about them. Probably this was because while he was at the front he had assured himself that this war was going to be the last, and that his mutilation and suffering would also be the last. It can't be that after such a butchery and self-extermination people haven't grown wiser.

He believed, and his faith lent strength to himself and to all those men in the trenches, that fear, malice and hatred would be unknown to their children who would spend their lives doing only good, sensible things. After all, life was so short!

They had been unable to achieve what they had dreamed of. He had failed, and so had the father of that boy with the golden voice. They had all failed. War lurked like the hot embers in a stove and the flames were always breaking out now in one place, now in another.

And this was what troubled him all the time. This was why he felt guilty towards the young. Once he had heard a highly honoured old man speaking on the radio. The mean things he had said! The young people nowadays, they had no appreciation for anything, no respect for their elders, the ungrateful creatures had forgotten what had been done for them, what had been built for them...

But what did he want, this old codger? Did he want them, too, to run about in rags? Not have enough to eat, go without sleep? Did he want them to feed the lice and bugs in overcrowded barracks? Why did he make out it was he who had given the young all the good things, and all the bad had dropped on them out of the sky? And why did he speak of the young people in this way, as if they were foundlings and not our own children?

Sergei Mitrofanovich had got so worked up that he actually spat into the loudspeaker and switched it off. But memory and conscience could not be switched off.

"It's only too easy to scold and jeer at the young generation," he thought. "We feed them, and so we deny them the right to argue. Run them down, then. And later they will

run down *their* children. And so it will go on and on, with no beginning or end. If we were big enough ourselves the kids would respect us not just for the food we gave them. That would be something! Even a she-wolf feeds her young, and sometimes sacrifices her life for them. And the cubs lick her face for that. But is that what we want? Our faces licked? Then why keep telling the young about pride and self-respect? We teach them one thing and then crush it out of them ourselves! ..”

Panya had come home from work and was waiting for her husband. She had not been considered beautiful in her youth. With her swarthy complexion, high cheekbones, and hands that had early grown coarsened in toil, she had looked mature even before she was married. But with the passage of years her girlfriends, who once had all the boys running after them, faded and lost their charms in the humdrum of family life, while time scarcely touched her. True, her eyes were not quite so bright now. They were a little softer and more intent, and her face was not so round; her cheeks had sunk and showed up her steep unwomanly forehead with that double line across it which, despite all feminine ideas of beauty, suited her well. With her tireless capacity for work and for taking life as it came, she roused the envy of her old friends:

“It’d be a different story if she’d had a houseful of children and not such a wet rag for a husband.”

But she never argued with them or discussed her life. It would have upset her husband, and she could not indulge in something that distressed him. She knew well that all the good that was in them had come from each other, and the bad they had tried overcome together.

Her mother was pottering about in the vegetable garden, pulling the radishes, beet and carrots, and angrily clattering her pail. There were eight flats in the house, and each family had about a tenth of an acre for vegetables near it. By constantly working on the allotment Panya’s mother sought to prove that she was earning her keep.

“I do believe you’ve been drinking?” Panya asked, meeting her husband at the top of the steps.

"I have, too," he responded guiltily, and went into the kitchen ahead of Panya. "I ran into some recruits, so I..."

"And what of it? You can have a drink if you like. I don't mind."

"They gave you their regards. All of them did," Sergei Mitrofanovich said. "And this is for you." He handed her the plastic packet. "And this is for all of us." He placed the handsome bottle on the table.

"Why, they're as nappy as mice. Can you really eat them?"

"You're a mouse yourself!" Sergei Mitrofanovich replied with a smile. "Call mother. No, wait, I'll call her myself." Suddenly his head dropped, and he added, "I don't feel so good today."

"Mitrofanovich! What's the matter?" Panya darted up to him, lifted his chin and looked into his eyes. "Stirred it all up again, have they? Yes, they have." Then it all came out in a rush: "Now just you listen to me. Don't go for that checkup any more. You always come back feeling so low. Don't go any more. Please! Do we need the money all that much?"

"It's not that," Sergei Mitrofanovich replied with a sigh and, opening the door a little, shouted, "Mother!" And louder, again, "Mum!"

"What is it now?" the old woman responded grumpily, and rattled her pail to make it known that she was a busy person and not to be disturbed.

"Come inside."

Panya's mother had once been a sociable sort and not averse to a drink at any time, but now she made herself out to be a model of self-denial. The sight of the bottle on the table set her off grumbling again.

"For what fine occasion is this? Have they given you the second category?"

"No, left me in the third."

"In the third! They'll grant you the second in the next world, I expect."

"Sit down and stop grumbling."

"Do you think I have much time for sitting down? Who will dig the vegetables?"

"How many vegetables have you got out there anyway!"

Four radishes and a dozen carrots!" Panya said. "Sit down, do! You've been invited."

The old woman washed her hands, sat down sideways at the table and picked up the bottle with its colourful label.

"How they've plastered the bottle! Cost a pretty penny, eh?"

"Not all that much," Panya retorted, siding with her spendthrift husband.

"Very tasty!" Panya's mother declared after drinking a glass in genteel fashion, and Sergei Mitrofanovich remembered the lad in the cap licking the cheese off his finger. "Why are you being so stingy?" the old woman snapped at Panya. "We've got some pickled gooseberries in the cellar, and cucumbers too. We've got everything!" she declared, striking herself proudly on the chest, and hurried off to the cellar.

After her second glass she said, "Well, I don't want to eat you out of house and home," and went out, leaving husband and wife alone.

Sergei Mitrofanovich was sitting in the front corner, leaning his head back against the wall with his eyes closed. His wooden leg had been wiped clean and was drying on the ledge of the Russian stove, and his stump and whole body felt much easier without it.

Having cleared the table, Panya sat down beside her husband and put her arms round him.

"Why don't you sing something? You don't sing much nowadays."

"Listen!" Sergei Mitrofanovich opened his eyes, and somewhere in their depths Panya spotted a gleam of pain. "You know, I don't think I've ever told you I love you, have I?"

Panya looked quite frightened for a moment.

"Whatever is the matter? Why?"

"Yes, you can live all your life and never do the thing that really matters."

"Don't frighten me like this!"

He groped for her and drew her close. The back of his wife's head seemed as helpless as a child's under his palm. She settled down in the crook of his arm and kept her face hidden.

After a while she stroked his face fondly. Her palm was calloused and snagged his unshaven cheeks. "Nappy", he remembered the word she had used. Panya snuggled against his shoulder.

"My dearest! My own darling! You want everyone to be happy, but how can it be done?"

"We're getting old, you and me," he murmured, feeling the knobbles of her backbone.

"Go on! "

"Yes, we are," he insisted gently and, easing away from her, said, "Pour just one more and we'll drink to all of us, old 'uns." Then he suddenly changed his mind. "No, let others drink to us, if they think of it. And we'll drink to the boys. They're still on their way, I expect."

Panya rose quickly and filled the glasses to the brim and, when they had drunk, gave him a smacking kiss on the lips, then covered her face with her kerchief.

"Listen to them! " came the old woman's grumbling voice from the passage. "Won't they ever have enough kissing and cuddling! If they had a brood of children, they wouldn't have time for so much necking."

Sergei Mitrofanovich's lids quivered and a helpless expression suddenly appeared on his haggard, unshaven face with its tuft of stubble under the lower lip. The old woman had hit where it hurt most.

"Must you always let your long tongue wag! " Panya wanted to retort. "Children are all very well while they're young, but then you have to break your heart parting with them." But over the years she had learned when to speak and when to hold her peace.

Sergei Mitrofanovich sat for a while with one hand clutching his face and then began to sing, very softly, as though to himself:

*Like a passing nightingale
Our youth has flown by...*

Panya listened and listened, and then had to cram her kerchief into her mouth. She didn't know why she was crying, and at that moment she loved her Sergei so much that had he told her she must go out and die for him she

would have gone and died fearlessly, with a bitter happiness in her heart.

With her hands still pressed to her mouth and barely able to see him through her tears, Panya lamented to herself, "Oh, Mitrofanovich! Oh, my one-legged soldier! It looks as if you'll never get over the war till your dying day. Where's your memory taking you now, I wonder? They've ploughed up the trenches and the cornfields are growing over them, but you're still there, still there..."

"And sing that other one. The one about you and me."

"Ah, that one. All right, let's have the one about us."

*When fair the day
Or gloomy the night...*

And once again Sergei Mitrofanovich saw before him those young recruits, and that girl with the tear-swollen face running after the train. His song now was for them, too.

The old women seated on the bench in front of the house, listened and sniffed. Panya's mother was plaintively relating for the umpteenth time:

"They invited him to join a song company, but he wasn't having any, the silly muggins."

"Well, look at it this way. If they were all to be taken on in the choirs and song companies, who would do the farming and fighting?"

"That's just where you're wrong, Ankudinovna. Anyone can farm and fight. But talent is given by God. And why is it given? It's given to be used."

"Everyone has some talent, but no provision is made for it."

"Well, I had a talent for baring children."

"There's plenty of that kind of talent about and to spare."

"Quiet, women, listen."

But the old women had missed the song with their clatter. They waited for a while and yawned a while and then, some making the sign of the cross, and others, without more ado, went off to their homes.

Night closed in on the settlement. Cold air drifted up the dells from the lowland by the river, and soon the grass was covered with hoar-frost. The vegetable patches, the aftergrass on the mowings, the roofs of the houses, all began to turn white. The forest stood motionless and the last leaves on it grew numb.

In the morning the forest would be filled with rustling and ringing, but at this hour a dark sky with bright, needle-sharp stars hung over the settlement. Only in autumn are there such mature, well-formed stars.

There was tranquillity on earth. Everyone was asleep. And somewhere, in foreign soil there lay a gun-crew, many gun-crews, that would sleep for ever. Heavy with its burden of metal and blood, the earth had meekly taken in the jagged shell-splinters and muffled the sounds of battle.

1967

Translated by Robert Daglish

VASSILY BELOV

(b. 1932)

Vassily Belov was born into a peasant family in Tamonikha, a village in Vologda Region. He went to school in Vologda and has lived there since.

His first efforts appeared in print in 1956. In 1961 he published his first book of poems "My Woodland Village", then his collections of stories and short novels "Sultry Summer" (1936), "The Winding River" (1964), "A Habitual Matter" (1966), "A Carpenter's Stories" (1968), "My Life" (1974), "Upbringing According to Dr. Spock" (1974) and the novel "Eves" (1972-76). The short novel "A Habitual Matter" started the new wave of "village" prose in Soviet literature, dealing with the life of peasants today, with their inner world, with the position of peasant women, with village customs, traditions and the rural communities' changing mode of living.

"Human life is that which exists between two great mysteries: the mystery of our appearance in the world, and the mystery of our

disappearance," writes Vassily Belov. "Birth and death protect us from the horror of infiniteness... All the peculiarities of folk aesthetics are predicated by the orderliness and timeliness of everything that must inevitably and necessarily happen between birth and death."

Author Sergei Zalygin says: "Belov's heroes are not so easy to find nowadays, but he does find them, and it is harder still to apply in the case of these modern people the stylistic techniques of Leskov or Turgenev, but Belov does apply them, and in a certain sense it is an innovation, not conservatism, not imitation, and even less so affectation. Because, after all, the revival and development of traditions in new conditions, when it has been already decided that these traditions have outlived themselves forever and can no longer evoke in us, modern sophisticates that we are, a keenly interested response, is also an innovation, and what an innovation too! "

*THE WINDING RIVER**

*What is my great fault before you?
How have I transgressed against you?
Have I eaten bread in barnfuls?
Worn out garments by the chestful?
Have I lost your keys, unheedful?
Reckoned up your gold in error?*
(From an old folk song)

In June Ivan Danilovich Grinenko went north on a timber-purchasing mission. As the hot Odessa horizons faded in the distance and the train clicked its way along the black-soil region, Grinenko's inner turmoil died away. On the way from Moscow to Vologda his placidity increased. It was as though the cool green of the northern summer had quenched the embers of worry and made way for the warmth of quiet, melancholy musing.

This mood and the faint excitement accompanying it were called forth not only by the fact of travelling. Long ago, during the war, Grinenko's army service had brought him, a youth of eighteen, for a whole summer to the north where he had mown hay for the army, and now pictures from his army youth floated up in his memory.

In the morning, after a white night with the sun barely below the horizon and the air filled with the scent of yesterday's rain and bird-cherry, he transferred from the train to a paddle-steamer. The old boat with clean cold decks, a snow-white deck-house and a pennant snapping in the blue air stood for a long time at the wharf, listing to port like some strong old ploughman with one shoulder higher than the other, resting on the broad river as though welded to its shining surface. Somewhere in its bowels a machine was chugging quietly. A very young sailor was dipping water from the river with a bucket on a rope and sluicing down the lower deck. Raising the bucket he cocked his cap and called out "Hey, Carrots!" to the ticket-seller who at that moment was on the wharf.

"Carrots" ignored him, and with adult amusement Grinenko observed her ostentatiously casual conversation

with an elderly cleaner. Early as it was, a barefoot teenager rode up on a bicycle and another was fishing from a boom; a woman walked along the bank, paused to cast a glance at the ship and went on. There were hardly any passengers or perhaps they were still asleep in their cabins. Suddenly on the landing stage a loudspeaker gave a hiss strong enough to be heard over the whole river, followed by a call signal. Swallows' nests clung to its black box all round, and the swallows themselves used it as a perch, in no way disturbed by the blare of the national anthem; Ivan Danilovich was amused by this combination of birds and music. It must be a merry life those swallows had, he thought, living as close neighbours to music and news from the whole world.

The paddle-steamer hooted, the youthful sailor quickly unwound the rope-end and tossed it on to the deck and then followed it—managing to bump against the girl. “Clumsy ox,” she said and brandished the cleaner’s swab threateningly.

Grinenko climbed the ladder to the upper deck. He did not feel like sleeping. All round was blue water and green banks with sparse villages. A milky-blue sky arched overhead. He found a seat on the bench in the bows where a wind neither cold nor hot flapped the pennant. The same wind brought the scent of bird-cherry and the crowing of cocks, the same as he heard every morning at home, in the kolkhoz near Odessa. Only at home there was no scent of bird-cherry, and the cherry orchards had finished blossoming; the feeling of spring was long past. Here the clock had been put back for Ivan Danilovich, spring had returned and again he thought of his wife, Marussya. Eh, Marussya, Marussya! He remembered that day during the spring sowing when he had hurt her—deliberately, hurt her so that she wept; and he remembered how quickly she had put aside that undeserved reproach. They were childless. Ivan Danilovich sometimes fretted about it although he loved his wife just as much as he always had. But one day in the spring when he had had a drink or two he suddenly noticed his grey hair in the mirror, and saw the neighbour’s boy through the window, and spoke bitterly to his wife. She burst into tears and he was glad. Eh, Marussya! When

he was leaving he embraced her and kissed her brow indifferently, a mere formality. And now as he was away, he kept thinking of her, tried to feel more compassion for her than for himself but nothing came of it.

The boat gave a sharp hoot as it approached another curve. The captain waved a flag from the deck-house to a tug. The banks seemed to draw together here. The river curved round a high mound crowned by a chubby white church. The boat rounded the mound and the river straightened. Next, a long raft with shanties for the raftsmen drifted slowly to meet them. The campfires on the raft, made in the night of a layer of turf, were barely smouldering; the raftsmen, taking advantage of the quiet stretch of water, were asleep in their shanties, their bare legs sticking out.

Ivan Danilovich sat on deck for a good while, then went down to the buffet for a glass of beer. It was sharp and cold. On the lower deck they were playing dominoes on a locker and the youthful sailor was mending his vest. The water surging past was clear as tears.

Marussya... Whether from the beer or the sleepless night, Grinenko dozed on the seat, conscious through the engine's throbbing of the splash of the northern river, the voices of women passengers and the hoarse, drunken sound of the siren.

The river was long, sunny and somehow melancholy in its quietness. With its many curves it was like life, long, and never repeating the past. Ivan Danilovich finally fell asleep with a sense of happiness mingled with something of that faint unacknowledged melancholy.

* * *

But where did it come from, what had awakened that melancholy? He continued to lie there, staring at the mat-surfaced lamp, deliberately avoiding looking at his watch so as to prolong the pleasant uncertainty of not knowing what time it was and whether it was morning or evening. He had dreamed, pictures from the past had floated up, confused in time. Their sequence was still confused although he was no longer asleep, and he had an

aching wish for them not to arrange themselves, not to retreat, not to dissolve.

Ah, Marussya, Marussya! But—it was not of her he had dreamed, not of Marussya—or rather, it was of her, but the vision had been broader, more all-embracing because her face was that of another woman. That vision had been so real, it still carried so much bitter emotion that for some minutes Ivan Danilovich could not remember Marussya, his wife, as she really was. At last he managed to separate the actual Marussya from what had been added in dreams and a sweet nostalgia burned and bedazzled him, for what he found was not Marussya but that other long-ago one, the very first. And now Ivan Danilovich knew what had been the seed of that strange elusive melancholy. It had been sown in the morning on the wharf, when he had caught the bitter-sweet scent of bird-cherry and the cold breath of the river, scents which belonged to the hay-fields in that far-off war-time summer here in the north.

He washed and softly, with clenched jaws, went up on deck, stepping carefully as though fearful of crushing to powder the precious sparklets of irrecoverable happiness that had been so clear in his dream.

The steamer was like a different boat. The sun was on the other side giving him the illusion of travelling in the opposite direction. There were people everywhere, men, women and children sitting on steps, on sacks and suit-cases. A baby was crying, someone was singing, someone was playing an accordion. The siren sounded again, the green bank slid past and a taut wave followed in the wake.

Grinenko entered the buffet and made his way with difficulty to the counter where he took a glass of red vermouth smelling of dye, ordered food and found a place which was free; another place was taken by a husky man, a typical northerner, in a mellow mood.

"I've had soup, and don't feel I've eaten, as if I'd just set it down beside me," he said expansively. "So I decided, let's have a glass of wine."

He was wearing a grey cotton suit over a dark blue shirt, his top-boots smelt of tar, his clear eyes looked naive yet wise and his mouth was evidently accustomed to

smiling, which gave a merry wrinkle to his large-pored potato of a nose.

"Are you going far?" asked Grinenko.

"Far? Nay, only two stops, but it's right boring with nothing to do. And where might you be going, I-dunno-your-name?"

"Ivan Danilovich."

"And I'm Ivan too." With a massive hand he picked up his glass of vermouth. "Let's toast it. To our acquaintance and a good appetite."

The wine had its effect on Grinenko; he ate the plain dinner and felt expansive, in a mood to talk.

"...you say the forests are getting thinned out? That timber of yours sticks in our throats, let me tell you, every knot of it costs money. There's payment per log, and the truck, and the tractor drivers."

Grinenko stopped with a twinge of annoyance. Annoyed because ordinary everyday matters were intervening and fragments of the dream were slipping away. He listened to the burly man, trying to affix in his memory the things which had so moved him, and the northern accent was another reminder of that war-time summer Ivan Danilovich had spent in the north. It was the same speech, the same rounded northern sounds he had heard then, in that quiet village, stirred up by the arrival of soldier-haymakers.

"Costs money, sure!" boomed the burly man. "If only some of our forests would grow by your houses, and your sun shine on our fields!.. Nature's been sort o'careless. Now, when I was in the army, in wartime—" he lighted a cigarette, "when I was in the army I saw how people manage when there's no forests. Heat with straw and that dried dung, how's it called—"

"Kizyaks."

"That's it—the very thing! Were you in the army?"

"Aye—did my bit of fighting." Grinenko waved a hand. "And before the front I spent some time in these parts. Mowed the hay round about your way."

"You did?" He seemed quite pleased. "I did my bit o'fighting, too, all the time in the thick of it, and four times wounded. How I stayed alive I don't know. And I

live all right, Ivan Danilovich, I'm on my way to my eldest daughter's wedding now."

"You've more than one daughter, then, haven't you?"

"One? I've got three! Two are with me now, and the eldest works in this district, she's an agronomist."

The buffet was noisy, the sound of the accordion was lost in the voices, and outside the windows green banks, rafts, tugs slid past, as the river wound and twisted.

"They're fine lasses," the burly man continued. "Bonny, they are, got all the lads in the kolkhoz running after them. And they're good girls, I can't complain. But come along up on deck, Ivan Danilovich, see for yourself! "

He got out a three-rouble bill and bought another bottle of vermouth. Ivan Danilovich saw him talking the buffet waitress round, wagging a horny finger at her, "Why, my dear, would you say I was drunk? Can you call me drunk?"

They went up on deck.

The curves of the river continued to follow one another, long rafts snaked past and leisurely clouds hung over the water, swirling and disappearing into a blue distance already veiled with the golden mist of evening.

"Hey, lasses, where are my lasses?" gaily shouted the burly man who by now was distinctly merry. He pushed his way between suitcases and baskets. "Ah, there they are! There are my lovely lasses! Zina! "

"Let's sit here," said Grinenko, and his new friend consented.

They settled themselves on a fire-box. Ivan Danilovich smoked and looked at the sisters. And again, as in a dream, he had a sense of happiness and an agitating, elusive, almost boyish melancholy. In the bows an accordion was being played, not the one on the lower deck but another, and here they were not singing ditties but a slow song Grinenko did not know but its melody was reminiscent of the one he had heard so long ago. The sisters were standing behind the player, they did not seem to be singing, and Grinenko had a clear view of only one, her profile. Both were plump and fair, in light frocks; they stood close together and sometimes spluttered, their handkerchiefs to their faces. The youthful sailor hung about them under cover of the general noise, showed them some kind of trick with his

fingers and probably found some teasing name for them, too.

"Zina! " the father called to one of the girls. "Come here and get us glasses. And bring over the basket of buns. There we are, wine and a chaser for it! "

He began opening the vermouth. Ivan Danilovich looked at the rather short, plump girl and a shiver ran through him. She came along the deck carrying the basket, closer ... closer ... and a long past forgotten thrill of delight grew with each step she took, like a return of that war-time youth when he had been a soldier of twenty and just such tender eyes had looked into his during haytime middays, and the sinful white nights that had melted over the stacks. He looked away, then looked back. The same eyes, the same long curved lashes. Even the white earlobe and the curl falling on her cheek were so amazing, so troubling that he could not believe his eyes and hastily emptied his glass.

The girl stood beside them smilingly fastening a button on her father's shirt while he poured out wine.

"Now it's this one's turn to get wed, Danilovich," he said. "It's a true word: a daughter's a treasure for another ... Zina! "

But Zina, embarrassed, had run back to her sister, to the singing, to the warm evening breeze; and Grinenko, agitated, hardly heard her father.

"...one after the other they go. That's life, Danilovich. And you, have you any to come after?"

For a long time Grinenko said nothing, then, coming to, said he had no children. Another curve of the river revealed a broad meadow valley, the siren broke his neighbour's sympathetic silence and they drank the last of the wine.

"Lasses, lasses..." The father shook his head soberly. "It's good having lasses, too, but all the same if there was but one lad in the house I'd want no more. I mind me when we were going to the front, my wife was that way, wi' a belly. And I says to her, 'Mind, Nastya, you've borne two girls, if you don't manage a lad this time we'll be disgraced afore everyone.' Well, and she was crying when I went and that was how I left her."

Several lads' voices joined the girls', awkwardly, roughly,

as though the lads felt embarrassed about it and concealed jestingly any unmanly tenderness. Many of the older women stopped chatting and bent their heads, even the steamer seemed to subdue its hot panting.

Just so the earth had quietened and the women's chatter had stopped when the soldiers, having pressed the hay mown during the day, found an abandoned accordion in some house and sang in the village. It was to the accompaniment of this singing that Grinenko had met his first and last love, met her in a wooden hayloft when he was little more than a boy, when the white night was so clear that Nastya could see the blush of shyness on the soldier's cheek, barely acquainted with the razor. Later, at home, after putting her three small daughters to bed, she had come to him in the shed and the cocks had crowed many times before shyness was replaced by courage and pride and that manly confidence which served him so well at the front.

His companion's voice impinged on his consciousness, and he came to himself with a start.

"...we were formed up in Koshuba, I remember, but the Germans knocked the stuffing out of us at Volkhov. So we were reformed again. We were moving over bare fields, only three were left out of our platoon. God a'mighty, the things that happened, the things I saw! Got my second wound and my third. I'd landed on the South-West Front. They called me from the dug-out, 'What's your name?' I told them: Gromov. And there it was, a letter. I opened it, read it—another lass I'd got! Well, I cursed a bit and went into battle—a girl, well, it couldn't be helped. Then I got clobbered again, and came to in a hospital in the Urals. I lay there while they patched me up and fed me up and back I went to the front. And there, I found a very different picture. The Germans had lost their bounce and ours had much more of it, not like earlier on, when they attacked with some cursing and others calling on their mothers. Now it didn't seem so fearful and the food was better, too. Are you listening, Danilovich?"

Grinenko's heart seemed to choke and stop, and then hammered against his ribs. He pressed trembling fingers against his face and passed them over his cheeks.

"Your wife was called Nastya—?"

"Yes, Nastya."

The burly man found difficulty in striking a light; his thick stiff fingers could not get a match out of the box, and then it broke.

"What is your village called?"

"Rodnichki, Danilovich, Rodnichki."

Rodnichki, Rodnichki—would Grinenko ever forget that quiet Rodnichki, and that house with the rowan-trees in front?

His companion's words beat against his temples like hammers.

"...Yes, well, what was I talking about? Yes, my woman. And the war. Well, I fought and fought and got to the Carpathians. Another wound, I'd hardly a whole spot on me. At first I'd had letters from my wife, but then they stopped coming. Once a letter came, scrawled on a page from a school exercise book. When I saw that my heart missed a beat—what did it mean? I read it—this and that, come home soon, we're waiting for you. But not a word about their mother."

"You say she didn't write?" Grinenko jerked his cigarette butt into the river and squeezed his head between his hands.

"Not a word. Aye... So at last I'd done my fighting and was back in my own district. Only forty kilometres on a cart and I'd be home. I went into a tea-house."

Grinenko sat listening, silent and motionless, his eyes tightly closed. A bright drop squeezed out into the wrinkles and the muscles writhed beneath the skin. Again eyes sparkled, eyes like that girl's, again came the intoxicating scent of bird-cherry and the same northern accent sounded round about him. He opened his eyes. The sun and the searing blue of the water blinded him and the siren announcing another curve drowned his neighbour's voice for a moment.

"...so I went in and there I saw a neighbour of mine, Sashukha, he'd come through, too, he'd returned earlier—not the whole of him, though, he'd left his leg up to the knee. We had a drink and Sashukha says, 'You and me are the only ones left in the village and I'm a cripple!' I told

him I was riddled through like a sieve, too, all scars and pits, good that my head was still on my shoulders. 'What's new in the village?' I asked. 'Well now, Ivan,' he says, 'them whose husbands were killed are sober womenfolk, and them as had husbands living, they lived loose.' 'You're wrong to talk that way, Sashukha,' I says. 'If there's a hearth, a cricket'll come. If all the men but you were killed, then you're saying all the women are good but yours.' 'And what are you expecting, Gromov?' he says. 'Yours was playing sweethearts with a soldier, too, and not for naught, neither. Come and see your new kid.' My heart stopped as if he'd thrown boiling water over me. 'But where'd soldiers come from? There wasn't a front along here.' 'And the hay,' he says, 'who mowed it for the artillery two summers?' I ought to have gone straight to the village with Sashukha, he had a cart, but instead I thought—to hell with it! —and went and got drunk. I rampaged all over that small town, got through all the money I had and a German watch—got through all of it in two days! Sashukha whipped up his horse and away home but I went right on drinking. And bad luck to it. If I'd gone home then with Sashukha everything would have been all right. Because what happened? Sashukha arrived home and told everyone Gromov was on his way, he was on a drinking bout. Well, I wakened the third day, and got a lift to the village. As I got near I was thinking, not worth fretting about her, my woman. I'd seen through women before the war ever began, and I thought, it's past and gone, what happened. Got to pick up our life again. Our lot didn't just bat our eyes either when we saw a tasty bit going in far parts, we had our fun, too. Now there's our girls to bring up, I thought. I'll take the strap, give her a couple as is proper, and then get on with living. So I come to the porch; the big gate was open, but no one was there to meet me and the house was all quiet. I felt sick at heart. Then my eldest came running out with 'Dad, Daddy!' And she cries and sobs and clings to my legs, she wasn't that big. So I picked her up and went inside. And there I saw a crowd of folk and a policeman sitting at the table writing. 'What's this good-wives, come to welcome a soldier? Where's my Nastya?' And then Nastya runs out of the bed corner and flings her

arms round me. I pushed her away. 'Wait a bit,' I told her, 'we'll talk after, without other folks round.' The wives and neighbours took the hint and went but the policeman sat where he was, so I said to him, 'And what might you be seeking in my house, my fine feller? Let's see the back of you, I've dealt with better'n you at the front.' He gave me a look, and then he went out, too. So just she was left, and the little girls who sat there like mice, not squeak out o'them. My Nastya looked at me—I remember her eyes were exactly like Zina's now, big and sort o'veiled. 'Well,' I says, 'why don't you light the samovar and run out to the shop? Maybe I should put it on myself and cut splinters for it?' And she just flops down on her knees. So I said, 'Get up, ye gawp, I'm not God.' I took off my belt, give her a stroke or two on her backside—for disinfection, I thought, and then she could start the samovar going. 'What, are you dumbstruck?' I said and she—'Ivan, forgive me!' And flop—at my feet again. 'Where's the child, show me.' 'There,' she says, 'my shame's there on the bench, I don't want to see him and I won't let you, I smothered him.' She spat on some rags. I looked—a dead child. 'What have you done, you lump o'muck, you darned fool, did I ever teach ye before the war to smother a living child?' And all the time I was thinking—oh the fool, the fool, whoever he was fathered by, he was alive, a living soul. 'All our lives,' I said, 'we've been waiting for you to bear a son, and now you've—! There'd have been a man growing in the house, and more fun for the lasses, and I'd have been glad, and now you—! I'd just have belted you a bit and there'd have been an end to it. You've robbed us both. To kill a lad like that! Was that what I shed my blood for?' Believe me, Danilovich, I sat me down on the bench and cried like a child. I'd gone through the war and never shed a tear, but then I cried..."

"Was he a—healthy child?" Biting his lips, Grinenko looked at the sisters.

"A fi-i-ne lad! Strong little arms and legs—lying there as if he was living, and I sat there—I'd taken my lasses on my knees—and couldn't get a word out. Fool, I kept thinking. The fool! "

He blew his nose and looked round. "Lasses. Where are my lasses?" When he saw them a broad smile spread over

his wrinkled face again and he thrust his big hands into his pockets in search of a smoke—just for something to do with them.

“Danilovich—hi, Danilovich, what about another bottle? Zina! ”

Again the ship's siren sounded, its deep hoarse voice sang over the evening cool of the river. A faint smoke from boys' bonfires drifted over from the bank, notes from the accordion murmured softly, the young sailor tap-danced his way into the deck-house, and the sisters began packing up the remains of the food in their basket.

“And—what happened?” asked Grinenko dully.

“Happened? Nothing. Ordinary peace-time life. Had enough to do looking after the lasses till they got big. A man left alone isn't a father, he's an orphan too. Lasses! Zina! I've left a mackintosh down below, don't forget it! Yes, they gave my Nastya eight years, and she didn't come back after, she went to her sister some way off. I didn't take another wife, I felt a sort of disgust for all women. I did the washing myself and heated the stove, I managed all that woman's work well enough, only I couldn't learn to bake buns, they were always heavy. And then my eldest grew up and the other two were getting bigger. You can see what they're like now. I don't grudge them anything, they've each got half a dozen frocks. I didn't buy myself good cigarettes, smoke rough *makhorka*, but I get frocks for the lasses. I've a good life, Danilovich.

*An old woman, very old,
Yet not so very old,
Went to the river to get water,
Left the pail I'm told,”*

he sang in a hoarse voice reminiscent of the siren and suddenly began to hurry.

“Well, Danilovich, time to be moving, we'll soon be pulling up at my landing stage. But I've got some fine lasses. Hi, lasses! Zina! ”

Grinenko too rose.

“Is she still alive?”

“I don't know, lad. She hasn't sent any letter and where'd

I write? And naught to write for, life's drawing to evening, there's only my daughters to give me gladness, and to dance at their weddings."

He sighed and put on his cap.

The steamer was approaching a clean little landing stage, it was already evening, and a warm red sun was sinking behind the next curve. The accordion gave a few last twiddles and runs and fell silent. A mowing machine rattled somewhere on the water meadows along the farther bank, and there was the same scent of bird-cherry, river water and the distant smoke of a bonfire. Zina, the elder sister, ran below for the mackintosh and arranged it carefully over her father's broad shoulders. Grinenko did not listen to the girls affectionately kidding their father, or notice them twitch his jacket to rights before hurrying to the gang-plank. He looked at Zina and an age-old pain, the pain and love of his army youth, veiled his eyes, and then changed to a stern, restrained sorrow—the burning sorrow of a man's heart. Taking leave, he nodded to the sisters, gritted his teeth and gripped the broad, horny hand of his companion. Tell him, or not? I could tell him, he's a good sort, he wouldn't be angry, he would understand. Tell him. But—what for? Grinenko dropped the big horny hand. Why rasp an old wound, the one that life had saved for this man when the war was already over?

The young sailor managed to pinch one of the sisters while throwing over the mooring hawser; she delivered a matter-of-fact slap to the hand and stepped on to the gangway. Then Zina left the ship. Grinenko looked at the white girlish neck, fought down his emotion and again pressed the horny hand. And the other, returning his grip, spoke quietly.

"You shouldn't be afraid of me, Danilovich. I guessed who you were, though not at once. You were too interested, it showed, you're like me, you can't pretend. Grinenko, you're called, aren't you? A Ukrainian name?"

"Yes, Grinenko," he marvelled. "How did you know?"

"They haven't forgotten in the village, they know the names of all the soldiers who came a-mowing in the war. And the women know the patronymics and one of them was Danilovich. Ivan. And I found your picture among some

old receipts, the girls played with it and then lost it. You're younger on it, stronger... Well, all right, if there's going to be a deal over lumber we may meet again, have a drink and remember the war. Eh, lad, if only there's no more war. I'd never go through another like that."

He stepped on to the gang-plank and it sagged under his weight. And for a long time Grinenko could not loosen the convulsive grip of his hands on the barrier.

The siren again sounded twice, very gently, as though fearful of startling the silence of the northern white night, and the boat cast off. Listing to port, with a good-natured bass hoot it moved off towards the next curve. Mist rose from the dreaming river by its banks, and beneath that sleepy mist one could not discern the warm, powerful, deep currents weaving their pattern and tirelessly surging between the green banks to some far distant goal, to the unknown, cold sea.

1964

Translated by Eve Manning

VLADIMIR SOLOUKHIN

(b. 1924)

Vladimir Soloukhin is a well-known poet and prose writer. His lyrical short novels "The Country Roads of Vladimir" (1957), "The Dewdrop" (1960) and many other works are about the countryside of to-day. "Letters from a Russian Museum" (1966) won its author a reputation as defender of the monuments of Russian antiquity, a man concerned with the idea of continuity in the great traditions of Russian culture.

The collections of short novels and stories, "Beautiful Adygene" (1976) and "Bread and Honey" (1978), established Soloukhin's reputation as a master of the short story.

Work on the stories was preceded by Soloukhin's many years as an essayist. "I made it my rule," recalls Soloukhin of those years, "that

the essay should be constructed like the short story, but based on absolutely accurate factual material... In order that essays may become real literature, in order that they may survive not only the current number of the magazine, but their own author by at least two hours, the half-truth will not do for them... They must have the naked truth alone... Interestingly enough, when, several years later, I began writing not essays but short stories, I felt like a racing walker who has been training in heavy footwear (almost as if he had weights on his feet) and had then gone out on to the race-track in plimsolls."

This faithfulness to the essential truth and the "recognizability" of the characters encountered at every step in everyday life are what makes Soloukhin's short stories so appealing.

We were sitting at table and talking. All the food and drink had been consumed. There were empty glasses left on the table, an empty frying-pan in which the eggs had been scrambled, a dish with the remains of some spring onions and the bread plate.

At the table, apart from myself, sat Kudryashov, the former Secretary of our District Committee (before expansion), now a regional worker, Grigoriev, the new Secretary of the District Committee (now the Party Committee), Borisov, Chairman of the Rural Council, and Leonid Konstantinovich Korovin, Director of the Technical Repair Station.

Leonid Konstantinovich was the one who told us a brief but significant story that I want to pass on.

And how he told it! Like a professional. Nothing superfluous, only the main details, as if he was giving the précis of a story he had already written.

As for having drunk a hundred grammes each with our scrambled eggs—well, after all, we'd just spent the whole day riding in two landrovers round the collective farm fields and visiting the teams to find out where the crops had sprouted, where they hadn't. It had been an exceptionally bad spring, with a summer-type, thirty-degree heat-wave in mid-April.

Moreover, the new chairman of the collective farm (they had appointed a young animal technician born in 1937) was a keen type, and a new broom sweeps clean. In order to tighten up discipline, the board of management had decided to take away the private plots from those who were not doing any work on the farm. For the no-good

layabouts or the people earning a bit on the side, this was a good thing; but as often happens with us, the management overdid it.

For example, an old man and his woman are living out their last years in a little tumble-down hut. They worked on the collective farm as long as they humanly could, but now they haven't the strength any more. They're already in their eighties! There's a limit to everything. Let them sit on the seat outside or potter about their little kitchen-garden. A small patch of fallow land with buttercups flowering in May, and "crayfish tails" and daisies in June, with a potato patch beyond the fallow land. True, they're over eighty, they could soon die off, but even if it's only for two years, they must live. The old folks need their land and the potato patch, and the little vegetable garden. The more so that no pension is due from the farm.

Then suddenly comes the decision to take away half the land.

"How can you, good people? Why, at the far end, beyond the kitchen garden, we've sown a few oats so as there'll be something to feed the chickens with."

A waste of breath! They didn't take any notice. So they confiscated the sown land. They didn't even think of compensation for the wasted seed. That's what it means when a new broom sweeps clean!

Or another case. A man has lived all his life in Moscow. He left during the Revolution, which doesn't mean he's a defector. He's been working at a factory in Moscow and might be said to have given his strength and skill to the people. Each year, for his leave, he goes to the village where he has a house by the river and a little orchard at the back of the house.

When he retires on pension, he goes back to the country to stay. The little orchard, in the meantime, is now tidy, cared for, clean, civilized. Not for sale, just for his own pleasure. It was, after all, said by a great writer that each should plant on earth at least one little tree. It was only natural that the pensioner should till the soil and look after the orchard.

And suddenly a resolution comes out: the whole plot along with the cultivated orchard is to be taken away from

the Moscow pensioner. As they say here, chop it off up to the corners. That is, leave only the land which is actually underneath the house.

The young collective farm chairman is a new broom sweeping clean—the district leaders have to sort out the mess. Is it surprising that by five o'clock, after driving around in the heat over dusty field tracks, we're starving and the scrambled eggs and bacon are much appreciated?

The conversation gradually took on a philosophical turn. They were discussing, I don't remember in what context, how far human strength or stamina can go, and whether man himself can know his limitations or are there hidden reserves whose existence is not even suspected but which suddenly come into play and carry the whole load uphill?

Various interesting examples came up.

"I'll say there are! In the war (we were coming out of encirclement) it looked like one more kilometre and we'd have it. We couldn't carry on another step. We were at our last gasp. But when the Germans came at us, we did another forty kilometres, and almost at the double... Work that one out."

I remembered a fantastic incident, very indicative in that sense, that Misha Gordenko, an ex-sailor, told me. The time-fuse in a depth-charge on the deck of their mine-layer suddenly started working. The two sailors heard the click and, well aware that the thing would blow up in a matter of seconds, picked up the mine, rolled it over the rail and heaved it overboard! It exploded astern. But the snag is that afterwards, in calm circumstances, those two sailors couldn't have lifted the mine one centimetre off the deck, let alone throw it over the rail. Where did they get the strength at the critical moment?"

"That's nothing!" Leonid Konstantinovich Korovin spoke up suddenly. "All those yarns of yours are nothing to write home about! Now I know a case..." And he told the following story.

"I was inspecting a collective farm in the village of... (he named a village about twenty kilometres away from ours). After goodness knows what hang-ups, we went for a bite to eat with the team-leader.

"This was a woman of about forty named Tatyana Ser-

geyevna. She had a nice house with three windows overlooking the street. Beneath the windows there was jasmine in the front garden, like basket of flowers. True, you could see that no one had looked after it for a long time. You know yourself that it's either be a team-leader on a collective farm or grow flowers—one or the other.

"And she was a widow. She'd buried her husband the year before. I don't remember, to tell the truth, what he died of, that is, of what illness—stomach ulcer, apparently. Or perhaps it wasn't that. I don't want to tell fibs and it's got nothing to do with the case anyway. What matters is that she was a widow.

"It was airy in the front room and tidy, with runners on the floor, flowers in tubs, cotton curtains, embroidered towels on the icons and red lamps burning in front of the icons.

"'What's that for?' we flew at her. 'You're on the board of management and you're a Party member—you ought to be ashamed!'

"Tatyana Sergeyevna signalled with the eyes towards the wooden partition and said, her voice falling almost to a whisper:

"'Mum's dying. She asked for the last rites yesterday.'

"I looked round behind the partition and I saw an old woman lying stretched out on the bed, the way the dead lie on a table. Even her hands were folded on her chest, as if she had been laid out ready. And to judge by her face, she was already just that: skin yellow, cheeks sunken, lips tightened and blue, nose sharp, eyebrows prominent and clear. To say nothing of her hands: wax and nothing else. And that ashen pallor on her face. Which meant the end was coming now or tomorrow. The old woman had done right to ask for the Extreme Unction.

"'Yes, Varvara Ivanovna has served her time,' I announced, coming out from behind the partition and going to the table. 'How old would she be? Turned eighty?'

"'Eighty-five,' confirmed Tatyana Sergeyevna. 'Yes, she's certainly served her time. She's raised seven children. Two daughters got married in other parts. Four sons were killed at the German war. One died not long ago (meaning her husband), the dead sons left little children behind them,

they had to be raised and set on their feet. Now they are all over the place: in Vladimir, at a tractor works, and one is an engineer in Moscow. They've grown up, but they never show their faces. Strangers to their own home...

"You think this tidiness is my doing? When do I, as a team-leader, have time to keep the house clean? I live on my feet and on my nerves from dawn to dawn. So all the cleanliness in the house is thanks to her. I have three little kids; the youngest is two-and-a-half, the oldest is six.

"Mum lay down three days ago. As if she'd suddenly cracked. Three days, and she's ready to go. She's going out like a candle. You swear at me because I've allowed an icon lamp to be lit and the Extreme Unction to be administered. How could I refuse if she's eighty-five and it's her last and only request, her last living desire on this earth? No, we're one thing, but the old people are different. Let them go as seems best to them. In the most human way from their point of view, even if we don't understand it.'

"At this point we noticed that we were talking about Varvara Ivanovna as if she was dead, whereas she was really still alive. Perhaps she could even hear our noisy conversation, except that she couldn't put a word in. We pulled ourselves together and began talking more quietly, then we changed the subject altogether.

"While we were having a supper of scrambled eggs, Tatyana Sergeyevna's three little children came into the room. Seryozha, the oldest, was a six-year-old grey-eyed little boy with flaxen hair. Four-year-old Masha, in a diaphanous shirt, was a round-faced, rosy-cheeked, sturdy girl, stained all over with berry juice. Vovochka, getting on for three, promptly clambered on to his mother's knees and began pointing at the food. All were barefoot, but not neglected. They were clearly in a woman's capable hands. If they had regressed a little, it could only have been in the last four days.

"We were supposed to call the team-leader to the regional district office for a conference. However, seeing that she was about to have a death in the house, we told her that she needn't go. She would have a lot to cope with: the coffin, the grave and the funeral supper, according to the

country custom. And the grief, for although the grandmother was very old and had outlived her time, it was still shame...

"On the next day, we were holding a conference in the District Committee offices, when suddenly the secretary summoned me to the telephone. It was a call from the collective farm where we had eaten scrambled eggs the day before. Team-leader Tatyana Sergeyevna had been killed outright by a piece of facing that had flown off a silage chopper. We had to go to the scene of the accident and investigate. What else could we do! It was a shock and we couldn't get used to the idea that our Tatyana Sergeyevna, good-looking, forty-year-old, strong and sturdy as a horse, was suddenly dead. The best team-leader in our area.

"I fetched a doctor and drove to the *Pobeda* farm. The silo pit was at the entrance to the village, so that we saw at once what had happened.

"Incidentally, what did we see? Our Tatyana Sergeyevna was lying dead on a maize silo. In a quilted jacket and a man's hide boots. She was lying prone, her face turned to one side. Her temple had been pierced by a piece of iron. Her hands were dirty, as is right for a team-leader. There was, to tell the truth, nothing to look at. She had lain there all night on the silo. They put her in the back of the lorry to take her to hospital for the post-mortem.

"I should have returned to the District Committee offices, but suddenly yesterday's scene came back to me: the old woman, almost a corpse, and the three little children.

"'What about them? What about them?' was the thought that struck me. An empty house. A dead woman and three little children. For some reason, I pictured the corpse and the three orphans round their dead grandmother. Or, perhaps they had crawled under the bench or the table and were sitting there in fear and trembling.

"I started up my landrover and raced to the village in top gear to the far end where stood the yellow house with the three windows overlooking the street and the mass of jasmine running riot in the old front garden.

"I braked. I ran up the porch steps and nearly died of fright. I was met by Varvara Ivanovna, on her feet and

carrying a bucket to fetch some water.

“‘Aren’t you dead?’ I couldn’t help saying it. I had been so certain.

“‘And what about *them*?’ Varvara Ivanovna nodded in a matter-of-fact way towards the hut in which her grandchildren were evidently sitting. ‘I can die all right. But who’s going to look after them if they’re orphaned? I haven’t got time to die, old woman as I am. It’s not the right moment. Go inside. Don’t worry. Some cold milk, maybe?’

“Believe it or not, but three years have passed and she’s still alive after receiving the last rites—Varvara Ivanovna, a Russian woman who had already departed this world. She’s alive, and she hasn’t time to die. But where does she find the strength?”

1963

Translated by Alex Miller

VASSILY SHUKSHIN

(1929-1974)

Vassily Shukshin, a gifted writer, film maker, scriptwriter and actor, was born into a peasant family, and lived a short but vivid life, packed with a diversity of interests. In his youth he worked as a fitter, then served in the navy, and after that was the headmaster of the night-school in his home village. He enrolled in the Institute of Cinematography, department of film directors, and completed the course in 1961. His first short stories appeared in print in 1959, and in 1963 they were brought out under the title "Villagers".

He divided his time between writing and film making. In 1964 the picture for which Shukshin wrote the script, "There Is Such a Fellow", won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. In 1968 he published his collection of short stories "There, Far Away"; in 1973 he made the film "Pechki-Lavochki"; in 1965 he wrote the novel "The

Lubavins", on which a film was based in 1972. In 1971 he wrote the film-novel "I Have Come to Give You Freedom"; two years later a collection of short stories "Types" and "The Red Snowball-Tree", which was made into a film.

Shukshin's characters and situations are amazingly true to life, and his stories and films have an enormous impact, stirring us profoundly. He expressed the soul of the ordinary Russian people, a soul obsessed with a quest of truth, funny characters some of them, simple-hearted and not always very successful in life. Critics wrote about Shukshin's characters: "They are anxious to achieve an ideal life, they have a harassing sense of dissatisfaction and a thirst for something which they cannot put in words. They are striving to understand the complex workings of life and their own personal place in it."

*MEN OF ONE SOIL**

There had been showers during the night and a distant growl of thunder. But a brisk morning chased the sun out of the mists and liquid silver flowed through the trembling wet leaves. The mists gathered in the hollows, then unwillingly left the earth.

An old man knows how to think calmly about death. Only then is all the hidden marvellous and eternal beauty of Life revealed to him. Somebody wants him to take it all in painfully for the last time. And then go away.

They all do go away. And the sound of their going was as soft and slow as the jingle of warm bridle-bits in the mouths of weary horses. How good, how tormentingly good life has been. If only it were not time to go.

A grey-haired old man was walking along the wet road. He was on his way to mow grass for his cow.

The village had dropped out of sight behind him. He was making for the *kuchuguri*, a vast undulating valley in the Altai foot-hills. When you got to the top of one of the hills, the whole valley lay spread before you, walled in on three sides by silent mountains. A land of rolling green, where men had mowed grass for centuries.

On the "brows" and "manes" of the hills the grass grew as high as a horse's belly. The hollows were cool and the thickets at the bottom of them had a damp musty smell. Clear, cold springs bubbled out of the rich, rusty soil. Sweet water! It made you want to sit there, in the chilly gloom, feeling sad and lonely. Of course, someone did care whether you were alive or dead. But all the same... Well, it was a mystery anyway. What was all this unbeara-

ble beauty for? What were you supposed to do with it?.. That was the pity—you just hurried by without noticing it...

But then you came out into the light of day and you were sorry to lose your own sadness. It was as if something still and tender as the dawn had just entered your heart; you felt full of joy and wanted to keep that joy in your soul. But no, all kinds of thoughts came crowding in and you forgot to rejoice...

The sun was climbing higher. The mists rose and melted away. The earth steamed a little. But this steam did not obscure the light; it merely deflected it from the earth, lifted it a little higher.

The birch leaves had dried, but they still retained their freshly washed, youthful tenderness and were gleaming in the heat. Invisible birds were piercing the great stillness of morning with their song.

It grew steadily warmer. The heat came rolling down the hillsides into the still damp valleys and the earth smelled overpoweringly of its abundant green strength.

The old man walked faster, but not so fast as to tire himself. He was not so strong now; he had to husband his energy.

How often had he walked or ridden along this road—all his life. He knew every turn in it. He knew where to give a horse its head and where to hold it back, so that it would not waste its morning strength either and then be fagged out for the rest of the day. He owned no horse now, but he could remember all the horses he had ever had. To anyone who cared to listen he could have described the character and habits of them all. His heart ached quietly when he thought of his horses, particularly his last. He had not sold it or bartered it, and it had not been stolen by Gypsies—he himself had ridden it to death.

It was in 1933. In those days he had been no old man, but a sturdy peasant farmer, Anisim Kvasov, or Anisimka, as people called him. Already a member of the collective farm, he had been given the job of patrolling the fields. But that year was a famine. People were reduced to eating goosefoot and nettles; many did themselves great harm with the sweepings of grain left on the threshing-floors through

the winter. It was all a matter of somehow getting through the summer, of holding out till the next harvest. Everything depended on the cows; only their milk could save the children whose bellies were already swollen with starvation.

One day, also during the mowing season, the village herdsman, a feeble little fellow, wore himself out completely rounding up the herd and fell down in a dead faint. God knows how long he lay there—a long time, so he said afterwards; and meanwhile the cows roamed into the clover. Late at night he drove them back into the village, all swollen, and shouted to the first person he met, "Do something! They've been stuffing themselves with clover!" What a commotion there was then! .. The women started wailing, the men grabbed their whips and rushed out to chase the cows about the streets. This was a disaster, and a great howl of grief went up all over the village. The cows staggered and fell, people collapsed from exhaustion. Anisim had a horse (when he had been put on patrol work the collective farm had given him the horse he had once owned himself, his own gelding Mishka); seeing what had happened, Anisim jumped on to Mishka and also started chasing the cows. They were at it all night, driving the cows about to help them overcome the effects of the clover, and at daybreak Mishka began to wheeze and his forelegs crumpled under him. Anisim did all he could, but there was no bringing the horse back to life. He wept and lamented over the dying animal. And after that he was charged with sabotage and spent six weeks in the local gaol. Still, it all blew over eventually...

And there at last was the old man's mowing patch: a gently sloping ravine, just off the road with a little marsh at the bottom, and a spring.

The sun was a hand's breadth above the horizon now; he was a bit late.

After a hasty breakfast of bread and freshly salted cucumber, the old man adjusted his scythe and ran the whetstone along its blade.

There's no better work than mowing. And the old man liked mowing alone best of all. He could think of so much in the course of a day.

The scythe swung with a swish and a crunch; the grass trembled and fell. Three paces away a snake raised its head, and wriggled off through the grass, its supple, repulsive body glittering. And another memory: one day as a boy he had been riding along at a good canter. All of a sudden the horse had seen or sensed a snake and jumped aside. And Anisim had fallen clean off his horse, and landed on his bottom, right on that snake. He "couldn't hold a thing" for a week afterwards.

Still memory continued to raise those days of cherished brightness from the depths of his past life, just as the pure springs well up in the murky water of a still lake. Snakes... In those days there was old grandfer Kudelka in the village. He used to tell the children that for every snake they killed they would be pardoned forty sins. And if a snake was thrown into fire, they would see dozens of tiny feet on its belly. So the children set about redeeming their sins with zest. They burned the snakes and, sure enough, when a snake writhed in the flames it looked as if it had a multitude of little white feet on its gleaming underbelly. And all the children would shout, "There! There they are!" All of them saw the feet.

The old man mowed until dinner-time, when the grass had dried out completely. The sun was blazing down now and he felt as if someone had placed a hot pancake on top of his head.

"Thank goodness for that," the old man murmured as he looked back at the patch he had mown. He had cleared a good stretch, and felt well content with his morning's work.

He went into the little shelter he had prepared for himself some time ago, when he had come out to look at the meadow. Now he could have a good, unhurried meal.

The shelter was warm with the scent of withered grass. Somewhere a tiny insect was keeping up a piercing high-pitched hum; the hot stillness was full of the dry, tireless buzzing of the grasshoppers. From above came the trilling of the swooping silver larks.

Ah, how good it was! It's rare for a man to feel good and to know that he feels good. It's only when he feels bad that he thinks, "Well, somewhere someone is enjoy-

ing life." If we're enjoying life, we just don't think it may not be so good for someone else. When things are good, they're good, and that's all there is to it.

The old man spread a clean faded bit of cloth on the grass and laid out his cucumbers, bread and clean spring onions, then went down to the spring, where he had left a bottle of milk, firmly corked with a rag stopper. He leaned over the stream, supporting himself with his hands on the damp springy bank, and drank for a long time, but not greedily. He could see the tiny light-coloured grains of sand darting after one another over the rusty stream-bed.

Just as if they were alive, the old man thought. He rose with an effort, picked up the bottle and returned to his shelter. And there on a stump by the shelter sat another old man, in a soft felt hat and with a stick between his knees. He was smoking.

"Good-day to you," the old man in the hat greeted him. "I saw there was someone here so I sat down for a rest. You don't mind, do you?"

"Why should I?" Anisim replied. "Come inside. It's not quite so hot in here."

"Yes, it's a scorcher today." The old man in the hat joined him in the shelter and sat down. "Pretty hot, eh?"

Those good trousers of his will be all green, Anisim thought to himself.

"Take a bite with me, if you feel like it," he suggested.

"No thanks, I had a meal not long ago." The old man in the hat stared so hard at Anisim that he felt uneasy for a moment. "Are you mowing?"

"Has to be done. You're a stranger in these parts, I see?"

"No, I'm a local man."

Anisim glanced at his guest and said nothing.

"I don't look it, eh?"

"Why not? We've got all kinds now." As Anisim munched a cucumber, he saw his guest's glance stray to the plain peasant fare on the cloth. Must be hungry, he thought.

"Have a bite," he said again.

"No, you eat it. You have a whole afternoon's work to do yet."

"There's plenty here! "

The old man from town took off his hat, revealing a gleaming bald pate, moved nearer, picked a cucumber and broke off a piece of bread.

"Have you got a newspaper?" Anisim asked.

"What for?"

"You'll make your trousers green. That's a fine pair of trousers."

"A-ah... Never mind them. Cucumbers! "

"What about 'em?"

"Delicious! "

"You're a local man, you say... Where from?"

"Just around here."

Anisim couldn't believe that his guest was a man from these parts. He certainly didn't look like one.

"I don't live here now. I was born here."

"A-ah. Just come for a visit like?"

"Had to see my homeland... Won't have the chance much longer. What village are you from?"

"Lebyazhye. Down this road."

"Just the two of you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Got any children?"

"Yes, three. And two more were killed in the war."

"Where are the three? In town?"

"Kolka in town. The girls are married... One's in Cheburlak. She's married to a teamleader on the collective farm there. The other's a bit farther off." He didn't say that his other daughter's husband was not a Russian. "Ninka was here last spring... Her kiddies are quite big now."

"And what town is Kolka in?"

"Well, he's sometimes in town, and sometimes he isn't. Always on the move. They're looking for metal."

"But what town is it?"

"Leningrad. He writes to us, sends us money sometimes... He's not badly off, you know. Keeps on saying he'll come and see us, but can't find the time. Maybe he'll come one day."

The old man from town drank a little milk and wiped his lips with a handkerchief.

"Thank you. That was good."

"Don't mention it."

"Will you go and mow now?"

"No, I'll wait a bit."

"How old is Kolka?" Another question.

"He was born in 'twenty..." Only after he had replied did it occur to Anisim to wonder why his guest was asking all these questions. He gave him a look.

The other responded with a short laugh that was not particularly cheerful, but not sad either.

"Yes, we're men of one soil..." he said.

He's a queer fish, Anisim decided. He's too old to be joking.

"What's your health like?" the townsman continued his inquiry.

"Not so bad, thank the Lord... Head aches sometimes. Half our village had trouble that way, even the youngsters."

"Any of your family around? Brothers, sisters?"

"Not for a long time now."

"Dead?"

"My sisters are. My brother never came back from the first war."

"Was he killed?"

"Must have been. That's the usual reason, isn't it?"

The man from town lighted a cigarette, and a blue wisp of smoke floated towards the entrance. Clearly visible in the green shade of the shelter, it vanished at once in the brightness of the open air, although there was not a breath of wind. The grasshoppers buzzed, the birds twittered in the bushes; the crested larks poured out their endless song on to the earth's warm breast.

A ladybird was creeping up a tall stem of grass near the entrance to the shelter. It climbed steadily and without fear... The two old men became absorbed in watching it. The ladybird reached the very top of the stem, swayed for a moment on its tip, spread its wings and flew off sideways over the grass.

"So we've lived our lives," the old man from town said softly.

Anisim gave a start; the phrase seemed strangely familiar. Not the phrase itself, but the way it had been said. His father used to speak that way when he was thoughtful—

with a kind of surprised little laugh, which he would follow up with an affectionate curse or two.

"Doesn't it make you sad, countryman?"

"Maybe it does. But what's the use?"

"There must be some help for a man at such a time?"

"Something ails you?"

"Yes. Regrets... I haven't had enough of life yet. I'm not tired. I'm not ready."

"Huh! .. When can you ever have enough of life? Who wants to lie there, in old Mother Earth?"

"Some people commit suicide."

"They're the ailing kind. A man can snap inside. He may look all right, but there's no life left in him. He's finished."

"I feel I haven't got to the bottom of things... Yet I know it's foolish. I've got as far as I could." The townsman was silent for a while. "It's this peace I regret... I've done too much rushing about. But you have to yield place to others, don't you?"

"Aye, that you do. Huh! "

"Wouldn't I just like to find a spot where everyone would forget about me, and then go on living there for another couple of centuries! Eh?" The old man laughed gaily. There was something disturbingly familiar in him, in that laugh. "Somewhere where everything would stay the same forever. Eh?"

"You'd get fed up with it I reckon."

"I'm not a bit fed up with it now! "

"Don't think so much about it beforehand, then you won't be afraid. When it comes, it comes... You may be ill for a bit, but not long! People go under in a week."

"They do, indeed."

"You keep looking ahead, and I'm forever looking back. That's just as bad, only upsets you."

"Memories?"

"Aye."

"But that's good."

"Good it may be, but it pulls at your heartstrings. Why upset yourself?"

"It's good all the same. What memories do you have? Childhood?"

"Childhood mainly."

"Tell me some of them! Did you get up to a lot of pranks?"

"Grinka, my brother, did. He was a caution, he was." Anisim smiled at the thought. "Where it all came from! .. I expect he was the same in the war—always sticking his neck out..."

"What did he get up to then?" the old man from town asked with lively interest. "Tell me about it... Please, while you're resting."

"Huh! .." Anisim shook his head and lapsed into a long silence. "He was a smart lad, he was... One day our neighbour Yegor Chalyshev caught us on his vegetable patch. He threshed us, of course, but not just out of spite. Those watermelons were still green and we'd have spoilt more than we ate. You can't see in the dark. You just band one on your knee, then take a bite and, if it's green, throw it away. Aye. He laid into us, that he did. And father added some for good measure. That put Grinka's back up. And you know what he thought of? He took a pig's bladder—we'd just killed a pig—and rubbed it in ash... You know how they make'em into balloons?"

"I do."

"Well, he dried it and blew it up and drew a terrible face on it..." Anisim broke into a chuckle. "I wonder where he saw such a mug! Then we waited till it was dark, crept quietly on to Yegor's porch and tied that bladder with string to the door beam... When Yegor opened up in the morning there it was, that awful mug staring him right in the face. The poor chap nearly fouled his pants. He slammed the door shut and locked himself in and started shouting up the chimney, 'Help! Help! There's a devil on my porch!'"

The old man from town burst into a roar of laughter and laughed till the tears came into his eyes.

"Gave him a proper scare, eh? Ha-ha! "

"Aye, after that they used to call him 'Yegor, devil on my porch!'"

"And another time—when we were a bit older—in the mowing season too... There was a man called Mikolai Rogodin—cunning fellow he was and a bit of a thief—one

evening he says, 'Grinka, put a saddle on one of the horses—take mine if you like—ride back to the village and snatch a few chickens off someone. I feel like a nice bit of chicken.' So Grinka didn't think twice, saddled up a horse and off to the village he went. Before long he was back with five chickens with their necks wrung. Pleased with ourselves we were. Into the pot they went and what a feast we had! Mikolai praised my brother all the time he was eating. 'Good lad, Grinka!' he says. And then Grinka comes back at him: 'Eat up, Uncle Mikolai. Eat up, as if they were all your own! ' "

Both the old men laughed heartily. The one from town lit another cigarette.

"He didn't half swear when he found out they were all his own! But what could he do? He was the one who had sent for them."

"Yes..." The old man from town dried his eyes, and fell into a muse.

Both men were silent for some time, each full of his own thoughts. The world outside the shelter buzzed and sang in the growing heat, and ever more prodigally and mysteriously exposed its beauty in the dazzling sunshine.

"Well, I'll be getting on..." Anisim said. "Seems a bit cooler now."

"It's still very hot."

"Never mind."

"Do you have to keep a cow?"

"Of course."

Anisim picked up his scythe and swept the whetstone along the blade. His eye roamed over the swathers of mown grass—he hadn't done so badly since morning. The old man from town watched him intently and sadly.

"Well, I'm off," Anisim said again.

"Right you are," the townsman assented. "Goodbye to you then." He looked straight into Anisim's eyes, said no more, shook hands firmly and strode away up the slope towards the road. When he came out on the road, he stood looking round for a moment, then walked away and soon disappeared round the bend.

The old man went on mowing tall late in the evening. Finally he went home.

His wife—as he saw at once—had been waiting for him impatiently.

“We’ve had a visitor!” she announced as soon as Anisim appeared at the gate. “Drove up in a great long motor-car, asked for you. ‘Where’s your husband?’ he says.”

Anisim sat down on the doorstep and placed his bundle on the ground.

“Wearing a hat, was he? An old fellow?”

“Yes, a hat. And such a fine suit. Like a schoolteacher.”

The old man sat staring at the ground in silence. Now he had recognized the strange likeness that had surprised him a few hours ago. Now he realized what it was. But could it really be that?

“Perhaps it was Grinka? Didn’t you notice anything?”

“Heavens above! Are you out of your mind? Grinka? Back from the dead?”

It’s better not to talk to a woman about any vague surmises you may have. She’ll never understand. When she’s young you can fill her stupid head with any nonsense you like and she’ll believe you; but when she’s old, you try to share a thought that’s just struck you—you’ll be the fool right away.

“Has he gone now?”

“Yes, he’s gone.”

Could it have been Grinka? Surely not?

The old man scarcely closed his eyes that night. By morning he had come to the conclusion that it was just a likeness.

Plenty of people look like each other! And why shouldn’t he have admitted who he was? Maybe he hadn’t wanted to cause a lot of fuss? He had always been funny as a boy.

But could it really have been Grinka?

A week later the old couple received a telegram:

“To Anisim Kvasov.

“Your brother Grigory passed away on the 12th. He asked us to let you know. Kvasov family.”

So it had been his brother, after all.

YURI BONDAREV

(b. 1924)

Yuri Bondarev, winner of Lenin and State prizes, is the author of seven novels, "The Battalions Ask For Fire Cover" (1957), "The Last Salvoes" (1959), "Silence" (1962), "Two" (1964), "The Hot Snow" (1969), "The Shore" (1975) and "The Choice" (1980). The war years, which the future writer spent as a gun leader, determined the themes of his many works.

Bondarev's writings have been translated into over sixty languages. His novel, "The Shore", was published by the French firm of Gallimard; "The Hot Snow" was received with great interest in the GDR and Italy. In a competition for readers of the Warsaw newspaper "Głos Pracy", "The Shore" was recognized as the best translated book of the year. The uniqueness of Bondarev's realism was finely appreciated in France, Poland, Italy, Denmark, Yugoslavia, the GDR and other countries.

A keen sense of personal responsibility for everything happening in the world makes Bondarev a true heir to the best traditions of the Russian literary classics. "Man, having been born, must carry

out the duty that has, so to speak, been programmed by his birth," said Bondarev once during an interview. "The just acts of a man are those that conform to moral laws and conscience and that give life its highest meaning, making all people as one. On his journey to the truth, which is far from easy to understand, duty elevates man above himself. Consequently, one act or series of acts accomplished by duty and conscience express the highest meaning of humanity, which I would define as goodness. There is nothing higher than this concept of goodness, if it is only given social, ethical and philosophical meaning. Goodness is love, and dignity, and struggle, and the movement towards a goal, and an attitude to the existing world, to a woman, to a child, to the falling snow, to the rain, to the glitter of the stars in August... Goodness is a strictly moral concept and it is only what is moral that makes a human being human."

The southern express did not stop there for more than five minutes. Pavel Georgievich stood on the deserted platform for a long time, listening to the warm rustling of the grasshoppers behind the embankment of the railway halt in the steppe.

After the stuffiness of the carriage, the exhausting travel conversations in the smoky compartment, at midnight, the game of preference, the unnecessary acquaintances and the tiresome creaking of the bunks, Pavel Georgievich was bathed in an incredible silence, just as in childhood.

Not without pleasure, he sat down on his suitcase, threw his raincoat over his shoulder and stayed there, looking about him with happy sense of relief. His profession did not give him much opportunity to travel; for some reason he loved the oily smell of railway sleepers, engine whistles, the hurried clattering of wheels, the rocking motion of the last vestibule where the little faded, furled-up flag glimmered in the conductor's hand, the warm wind from the speeding carriages—all this stirred in him a vague desire for movement, for a change of locality.

Sometimes in Moscow, sitting over his drawings until late at night, he would raise his head, look through the window at the poplar-trees and, falling into a reverie, would listen for a long time to the night trains calling plangently to one another across the sleeping city. Sometimes the whistles bothered and disturbed him, and then he would remember the darkening steppe with the dusty sunset over the dark ricks, and he would stop work, tiptoe out of the house so as not to wake up his wife and then wander round the quiet deserted streets.

Pavel Georgievich Safonov was a designer at a big factory, was well-known, had become used to being well-known with the years and was a trifle weary of it, as people sometimes grow weary when success and contentment come to them early. This year, exhausted by a hard winter's work, Safonov had been to a sanatorium on the south coast of the Crimea. The dazzlingly sunny south with its sharp, dry heat, unnaturally exotic palms on the boulevards, scorching sand on the beach, swimming and therapeutic sun-bathing under the warm iodine breath of the sea and the whole sanatorium regime had disposed him to inactivity and seaside resort sloth had got the better of him. His thoughts in that heat had also been dull and lazy, and he had wanted to get back to Moscow as soon as possible, to the autumn rains, to the wet asphalt, to the radiance of the street-lamps in the puddles.

The southern express, on which Safonov had been returning from the sanatorium, rushed him through the familiar country in which he had been born and raised but which he had not visited for many years. In the morning, looking through the misted windows of the platform at the cool steppe, Safonov had remembered with a kind of sad poignance what he had already half-forgotten: there he was, a little boy in a grubby satin shirt, with chapped hands, running across the steppe that was icy with dew, running after the train goodness knows where; and the grass, heavy with dew, whipped his legs as high as the knees, pleasurably chilling his skin... How old had he been then? Sometimes he clearly imagined that he and Vera were walking across the moonlit slope of Shakhty Hill; there was a distinct, acrid odour of wormwood floating up from the low-lying land, and Vera's wind-chapped lips were also redolent of wormwood. The memories took him back to a world he had lived through a long time ago (or, perhaps, not lived through); they reminded him that he was already past forty and that he had not achieved much in his lifetime, in which his youth with its landmarks was long past.

Suddenly, he felt an irresistible urge to spend some time in his little home-town of the steppes: to wander round, read the billboards, see the old street names, find

out what changes there had been after many years, meet the people he had known in his schooldays, so far away now that they might never have existed. He passionately wanted to sit with Vitka Snegiryov, the friend of his youth, somewhere in an open-air café under a canvas awning over a cold beer, to remember what was so naïve, remote and precious and would never return, but had nevertheless once been part of his life.

Although this desire had prevailed, Pavel Georgievich wiped his nose in an ironic way (at his years, he sometimes ridiculed his own secret desires), went into the compartment, where everybody was asleep, thought again, packed his suitcase, took his raincoat and, to the astonishment of the sleepy conductor, who was soundlessly sweeping the corridor, got off at a little railway halt early that August morning. He didn't alight at the station in town, but right there, so as to get to the town on foot.

The southern express, with its window-panes ablaze in the dawn glow and with its dusty curtains, moved off; scraps of papers whipped up by the wind flew along the embankment. The train was soon gone; the smoke from the almost noiseless engine melted in the glassy mauve sky far in the west, and silence fell.

Only on the embankment was there the insistent din of grasshoppers chirping in the uncanny silence.

Sitting on his suitcase, Safonov smoked a cigarette not without some excitement, and thought, "Exceptionally good!" He inhaled with pleasure a lungful of the air, chill and clear as spring water. At that quiet hour of the morning, the steppe in all the blazonry of summer was a warm crimson behind the hills in the east. Over there, into that flaming infinity, a lorry was travelling in a cloud of dust along a slope and, clearly etched against the red, were the remote silhouettes of a water tower, oases of little white houses and the tapering crowns of poplar-trees.

Without hurrying, Pavel Georgievich went down the embankment into the steppe as into a grove that was still full of damp coolness. He was swamped by the bitter smell of wormwood. As he made his way towards the road, his knees became wet with dew, burrs attached themselves to his raincoat and trousers, and damp petals stuck to his suitcase.

He walked along the road, his shoes sinking agreeably into the soft dust; then he broke off a wand covered with young, sticky bark. Knocking off the dew like a little boy at play, he hit a mauve flower on the head (he had known its name in childhood, but had forgotten it). A sleepy golden bumble-bee suddenly rose from the depths of the flower. All covered with damp pollen, it buzzed heavily and angrily past.

"Look at you!" said Pavel Georgievich, following it with amusement. "Sorry if I disturbed you..."

When Safonov walked into his home-town, he was greeted on the outskirts by the long shadows of the old poplars stretching right across the road. A blue samovar haze was rising here and there in the orchards, the branches of sun-warmed apple-trees hung over the fences. Safonov walked along, flourishing his cane and inhaling the fragrance of orchard freshness. The tarry samovar haze, the odours and the shadows of the poplars reminded him of his childhood, of the dove-cote, of playing at Chapayev, of the destructive raids on other people's orchards—how long ago was it? Had it ever been?

He spent the whole day walking round the town and did not recognize it. Nor did town recognize Safonov. The ancient town of the steppes looked as if it had been resettled and rebuilt: with its comfortably gleaming plate-glass shop-windows, the town centre teemed with colourful crowds hurrying to get somewhere over the crossing; militiamen in white shirts, their faces tanned chocolate brown by the sun, waved their batons with studied flourishes as they controlled the traffic; perspiring people stood at the trolley-bus-stops in the dappled shade of the acacias, and aerated water was on sale everywhere, as on Gorky Street in Moscow... In the old days, red-faced, bearded ice-cream vendors in aprons, like street-sweepers, had yawned in the heat, lazily shouting their wares, and the sweltering streets had been scorching hot and deserted except for the dogs stretched out in the cool porches, dozing with their tongues hanging out, and the chickens whimpering in the white, dusty wormwood.

Four times he walked slowly along the street in which he had been born and where his low, clay-plastered house had once stood. There was now a boulevard there, young, fresh, with sandy avenues, mottled with shadows and patches of sunlight. That boulevard, which had never been there before, did not remember anything of Pavel Georgievich's childhood, did not know that here he had clumsily kissed Vera at a no longer existing side-gate, and she, her head thrown back, wonderingly touching her lips with her fingers, had said in helpless dismay: "For life, yes?"

Safonov sat on a bench and surveyed the boulevard for a long time with an aching heart. Nothing remained of the past, of his childhood; nothing remained at all. It was hurtful and bewildering, as if he had been cruelly and maliciously deprived of something that should never have been taken away from him.

Where was Vitka Snegiryov now, and where was Vera? Vitka, his first boyish attachment, and Vera, his first passion, agonizing and touching, with billets-doux in school, with the snow falling softly on to the porch, with the first awkward kiss that he still remembered...

Pavel Georgievich looked at the prams, at the infants in white cotton hats crawling about in the sand, at a sun-tanned young man in a sleeveless vest, bony as an adolescent, and a girl with a spray of acacia in her teeth, complete strangers to him, walking slowly along the avenue of the boulevard. He stood up and, with an elderly sort of movement, threw the raincoat over his arm. For some reason he felt like a tourist in this town.

He felt suddenly drawn to Garden Street; there, on the outskirts, in a street thickly overgrown with trees, Vitka Snegiryov had lived in that world of childhood, and Vera's little house had been on the corner, by the chemist's shop. He wanted to learn something about them. How were they? What were they like now?

Garden Street was the same as before; the luxuriant white acacias, mixed with poplars, had proliferated along the fence and had interlaced their branches over it to form a dark green canopy above the whole street; the poplar catkins lay on the pavement like hairy caterpillars, as in his childhood. Safonov looked to either side of him at those

one-storey tree-shaded houses dear to him since childhood and at the faintly gleaming windows of the ivy-covered summer balconies, and he eagerly sought everything that was old, familiar and unique.

"Here it is, the little house! .. Vitka Snegiryov's! Yes, yes! Number Five." The number with the lamp was barely visible through the dense branches of the trees, and Pavel Georgievich even smiled in surprise, pushing his hat on to the back of his head. Feeling suddenly undecided, he climbed up the steps of the creaky old sun-warmed porch; there was a fragrance of dry wood.

He was met by an elderly woman. He didn't know her. "No, the Snegiryovs haven't lived here since the war, they've all left. I may have got it wrong, but they could be in Sverdlovsk. They had a son, a factory director. He came two years ago on leave. And who would you be? A relative?"

As he listened, Pavel Georgievich took off his hat and fidgeted with it. Finally, having got the picture, he disappointedly muttered a few vague words: "Yes, a distant relative." Then, feeling bitterly disappointed and somehow cheated, he went slowly down the porch steps.

Where could he go? He had still not lost hope of finding someone or learning about someone; he had never forgotten the steep roof of the chemist's shop at the far end of the street and, next to it, the little house under the poplars where Vera had once lived.

However, he approached the house, visible beyond the chemist's shop sign, with such apprehension, such timidity, such an unexpected surge of agitation, that he had to stop on the corner under the poplars to recover his breath. Did he really still love her? He couldn't understand what had come over him, a married man with a family. Perhaps it was a momentary feeling of keen regret that everything had somehow worked out differently; perhaps it was the memories of a happiness that had long since flown away.

He wiped the perspiration from his brow and stabbed the bell button. And waited, again fumbling with his hat and trying to overcome his uncertainty.

Vera's mother, now much older (he recognized her at once, but she didn't recognize him straightaway: "My God,

Pavel, is it you? Have come home, Pavel?"). She bustled about awkwardly, apologizing guiltily for the untidiness of the room, gave him a seat on the divan and began to question him too hurriedly and, at the same time, to say, "We heard, we know how far you've gone." Hardly able to understand her, he waited impatiently for her to stop asking questions, and at last stammeringly inquired:

"But where's Vera?.. Where is she?"

"Vera?" She looked at him strangely. "Vera?" she repeated more quietly, turned away and raised her hand as if to shield her face.

He could not breathe properly.

"Where is she?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Didn't you know, Pavel? She's no more... She's no more... She was an ambulance girl in the war..."

"I can't believe it," said Safonov distractedly and dully.

Later on, he remembered that as she saw him off, Vera's mother had seemed to be looking into the very pupils of his eyes with a thoughtful look, saying sadly:

"What a pity, what a pity! .. You grew up together..."

Safonov felt finally broken. He did not know where to go or whom to look for now, and quite aimlessly dropped into the open-air café on the corner. It was hot and stuffy and he didn't feel hungry; but when the waiter came up he ordered two bottles of beer and sat for a long time amid the noise and meaningless chatter in the shade of an umbrella, wearily looking at the town, all green with acacias, southern in its white, sunny beauty and somehow alien to him now...

He felt miserable, lonely and chagrined. Without finishing the beer, he suddenly paid his bill and, not without the vestiges of determination, went out to wander round the city, still nursing a faint hope.

He did not meet anyone, however. After nine in the evening, finally tired and feeling as if he had been robbed, he headed for the railway station. The lamps were coming on in the soft twilight, the streets were motionlessly yellow in the gaps, there was a fresh breath of coolness from the orchards. The lights had come on in the houses and a radiogram started playing on a balcony behind a fence. Trolley-buses, illuminated like green aquariums, were sweep-

ing along the highway towards the town park with a swishing noise; the neon zig-zags of a cinema sign shimmered on the corner.

No one in this town knew him. Only Vera's mother.

Pavel Georgievich went up to the trolley-bus stop, put on his raincoat, raised his head and suddenly, in a gap in the street, noticed his old school. A four-storeyed building with dark windows, it was standing there as always... It hadn't changed. It was just the same as before, in his childhood, so many years ago.

For several minutes he stared at the dark silhouette of the school; then, as if impelled by something, waved his hand with a gesture of resignation and went into the deserted school park... Tired but happy, he sat down under the old acacia near which, during breaks, they had once played forfeits. It used to be in spring, when the earth was still exuding a pleasant dampness. He felt the bench, stroked the trunk of the acacia and laughed as if he had met a very old friend, a painfully kind one who had not changed at all; he knew all about Pavel Georgievich and Pavel Georgievich knew all about him...

Had he really once sat at a school desk? Had there really been a muffled rumbling over the school once, during the spring exams, and had a May shower descended on the town with the cheerful ferocity of the year's first thunderstorm? And it had passed over, with a violent splashing on the asphalt, the noise of rain streaming through the branches, with the booming of the drains and with violet flashes of lightning over the wet houses. He had wanted to leave the exams and run about with the other boys in the warm, cheerful rain, to roll up his trousers and paddle in the warm puddles which were still bubbling, but already beginning to reflect the brightening sky.

"Yes, it happened!" He imagined it all vividly and, again looking with agitation and curiosity at the dark school building, suddenly noticed on the right, in the damp darkness of the park under the dense acacias, a little red light struggling through the branches. Could that be Maria Petrovna? She had lived there, his maths teacher. Why had he not thought of her at once? Why had he not remembered? He had always been her favourite; she had predicted

a brilliant future for him in maths...

Safonov jumped up from the bench and walked all the way along the avenue into the depths of the park. When he saw, just ahead of him, a little house under the trees, the dull light in its window covered with a red curtain, he actually gasped. It was so many years since they had seen one another! Was she there now? Alive? How was she getting on? So much was associated with the name "Maria Petrovna"!

Carefully holding his breath, Safonov mounted the porch steps. He wanted to knock, but the door was open. He went into the unlit hall that smelt of paraffin. There was a chink of light under the door of her room.

Safonov knocked. There was no reply.

In dismay, Safonov pushed the door open and only then did he realize that there was no one in. Smiling as he heard the radio playing in the empty room, he felt his way through the dark hall to the front door. He caught something with his shoulder and a bucket fell down with a clatter. Pavel Georgievich automatically bent down to pick it up, dropped his hat and swore heartily, "Blast! "

"Who's that?" said a voice behind him.

Pavel Georgievich straightened up and half turned round. In the illuminated doorway stood a diminutive, thin woman, and he recognized her immediately, without having seen her face.

"Maria Petrovna," said Pavel Georgievich quietly and urgently, "d'you recognize me?"

"Come in," she said in the same polite, stern voice with which she had addressed her children's parents when they came "for a little talk".

Pavel Georgievich went inside. Dropping his hands and gazing into his teacher's short-sighted eyes, he said once again:

"Don't you recognize me, Maria Petrovna? It's me..."

For several seconds she peered up at him, and he could see her sickly, pale, aged face and, restraining his pity, he mentally noted that she had changed a great deal, had become even more frail; except that the white hair was cut short in the old familiar way.

"Pasha Safonov... Pasha?" she repeated, almost fearfully,

and Pavel Georgievich had the impression that her face was quivering. "Do sit down... Please excuse me, I'm very untidy. Do sit down, here. At the table, Pasha... So you've come to see me, then?"

"Yes, just a minute," began Safonov joyfully, awkwardly hanging up his raincoat and hat on the hanger where he could see Maria Petrovna's solitary coat. As he did so, he did not know why he, a grown-up man of substance, should be feeling so shy and blushing like a schoolboy as in those bygone years.

He wanted to shake Maria Petrovna's hand but restrained himself; a son doesn't shake hands with his mother on meeting her. He simply took out a packet of cigarettes.

"May I?" he asked with restraint.

They sat at the table. Inexplicably wary and incredulous, peering near-sightedly at him and smiling, Maria Petrovna quickly repeated:

"Well, Pasha, so you've come home. I'd never have recognized you. Are you here on business?"

"Just passing through, Maria Petrovna," he replied and did not say that he had been holidaying in the south, for to have done so would have been irrelevant and inappropriate.

"We'll have some tea... Just a moment, just a moment, we'll have some tea." She stood up and suddenly sat down again weakly, resting her thin arms on the table and smiling in disbelief. "Yes, yes, Pasha... I never expected to see you. Pasha Safonov..."

"There's no need for tea, Maria Petrovna," he said in embarrassment. "I've just had supper..."

He didn't want tea; he just wanted to sit at the table and look at Maria Petrovna, talk and ask questions... But, as if ignoring him, she picked up the kettle, and her movements seemed constrained.

"Just a moment, Pasha... Excuse me for calling you that... After all, you're..."

She didn't finish her sentence and went into the kitchen. At this point, Pavel Georgievich recovered his composure, sighed almost with relief, passed his hand over his forehead and looked round. She was alone, as before the war, and was living in the same little room with one window

overlooking the orchard. Everything was as before, the table, the bed, the coloured carpet on the wall, the embroidery on the chest, and a wide, capacious cupboard full of books; an inkstand and a pile of exercise books in the middle of the table, and a neatly sharpened red pencil on one side. He had only been in this room once. He had been sent for by Maria Petrovna: frowning sternly, she had given him a talking-to. He had made a jumping inkstand and put it on the German teacher's desk. Safonov couldn't believe it now: an abyss of time lay between the former Pasha and the present Pavel Georgievich, designer, sitting right this minute at the table and feeling somewhat embarrassed.

Maria Petrovna came in with the kettle and said cheerfully:

"Everything's ready. Well, Pasha, tell me all about yourself. What are you doing now? How are you getting on? By the way, I know a lot about you. From the newspapers, and I've read articles. I've been reading your book. Are you married?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, Maria Petrovna," replied Safonov.

She looked at him with quizzical affection.

"Are you happy?"

"I suppose so, Maria Petrovna. I have a son."

"Good," she went on to say, as if she hadn't heard him.

"And how's the work? What are you busy with now?"

"A new design, Maria Petrovna."

"How's it going? A success?"

"I don't know yet, Maria Petrovna. Let's talk about the past, old days, school..."

Maria Petrovna shook her head and said thoughtfully:

"I remember your class well. Pre-war. They were mischievous, able little boys. And I well remember your friendship with Vitya Snegiryov."

"D'you remember how you gave me a bad mark for algebra? In the sixth year, I think..."

"Yes. You hadn't done your homework, so you hoped you'd get by somehow. But maths came naturally to you. Except that you were lazy."

"D'you remember how I organized a crib system, Maria Petrovna?"

"Was that the invention by which the crib moved along

a thread between the desks?"

"Yes! " Pavel Georgievich laughed. "And the jumping inkstand? I couldn't think up a thing like that now. I remember sitting up at night and beating my brains out to calculate the right strength of the spring so that the inkstand would jump just at the moment when the teacher dipped his pen."

Maria Petrovna frowned, as if restraining a smile.

"And I remember something else; you were standing before this very table, Pasha..."

She didn't finish, poured out the tea, took a spoon and thought for a moment.

"D'you remember Misha Shekhter?" she asked.

"Of course, I was jealous of him! We read his compositions in class: 'The Image of Tatiana', 'Woe From Wit'. I couldn't come up with anything."

"He became a journalist," said Maria Petrovna slowly. "He travels all over the country and abroad. I often read his articles. And I often remember..."

"Has he called to see you?"

"No."

"Indeed," said Safonov, "we're a long way from one another now. I heard Vitka Snegiryov's a factory director in the Urals. Never thought he'd be that! Senka Ignatsev's head of a board of management. Have you heard? I met him in Moscow. Impressive looking, you'd never recognize him. Hasn't he called to see you either?"

"What?" asked Maria Petrovna. She lowered her eyes and nodded slowly. "Drink your tea, Pasha..."

"Maria Petrovna, who else from our class has called on you?" asked Safonov agitatedly. "Have you seen Grisha Samoilov? He's an actor. You remember, he used to pull funny faces and you told him that he had talent. He was an amusing lad."

"I've only seen him on the screen, Pasha."

"Me too. You mean he's never come to see you?"

Maria Petrovna did not answer. Her head bent, she stirred her tea and he noticed an indelible ink-stain on her finger; he transferred his gaze to her face, and saw, with a kind of sudden pity, with love, the wrinkles round her lips, her thin, feeble neck, the snow-white, short-cut hair,

and something painful and sad touched Pavel Georgievich's heart-strings. If she died, he wouldn't even know about it. Nor would the others...

"Maria Petrovna," he said almost inaudibly, "Vitya Snegiryov didn't call on you then? He came last year apparently."

She sat with her head bowed as before, merely stirring her tea more slowly.

"No, he didn't..."

"Who has?"

"What? Please drink your tea. It'll get cold."

"Maria Petrovna, it would be interesting to know if anyone writes to you. Remember Volodya Boikov? Nina Vinokurova? Boris Gmyrya? D'you know anything about any of them?"

Again Maria Petrovna did not answer, but looked round at the window; the orchard was dark out there, and the light of a passing trolley-bus glimmered fitfully through the trees.

"No, Pasha," she said. "Kolya Sibirtsev often comes to see me. He works in a mine. His life hasn't worked out very well for him. He often calls."

Safonov vaguely remembered Kolya Sibirtsev. He had been quiet, timid, in no way remarkable, had not distinguished himself with any special abilities, and Pavel Georgievich had difficulty in recalling his face.

"I don't remember him well," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I've forgotten him."

"That's very bad," said Maria Petrovna; perhaps mocking, perhaps accusing him.

They fell silent. At her words "That's very bad", Safonov had felt uneasy; he had grasped the double meaning. In the silence that ensued, he moved his glass nearer to himself, reached out for sugar and noticed that Maria Petrovna was looking long and searchingly at the book-cupboard. He glanced that way too and noticed, in the first row, the familiar back of his latest book on aircraft design.

"Maria Petrovna," he said quietly and half-inquiringly.

"What is it, Pasha?"

"You have my book, Maria Petrovna?" he said in an

undertone and was silent at once, remembering that he had not sent it to her.

"Yes, I've read it."

He stood up, took his *Aircraft Design* out of the cupboard, turned a few pages and, feeling his face was beginning to burn hotly, said with embarrassment, with foolish eagerness:

"Maria Petrovna, shall I write something in it for you? Will you permit me?"

A small sheet of paper fell out of the book. He hastily picked it up, saw his photograph from a newspaper and looked stunned at Maria Petrovna. She was stirring her tea.

"Not a bad book..." said she very quickly. "I read it with interest. That's from *Pravda*, Pasha. I sent you a telegram when I saw it."

Just as hastily, as if hiding something that was compromising and unpleasant to him, he hid the sheet in the book and, overcome by self-hatred, now distinctly remembered having indeed received a telegram two years ago among a heap of other congratulatory telegrams. He had not answered it, although he had acknowledged the others.

Safonov vaguely remembered what he wrote in the book, but he distinctly remembered them saying goodbye. He somehow contritely removed from the hook his fine raincoat, which was hanging next to his old teacher's worn coat, and bowed with a feeling of guilt. She put on the hall light and came out to see him off.

He was silent. Maria Petrovna, also silent, suddenly asked timidly:

"Tell me, Pasha, is there just a tiny drop of me in your work? Just something?"

"Maria Petrovna, how can you ask?" he muttered in confusion. "Without you..."

She looked into his eyes and said in a trembling voice:

"You think I won't tell my pupils about this tomorrow?.. Go, Pasha, and the very best of luck. I wish you every happiness..."

They said goodbye. He walked quickly away along the path of the nocturnal orchard. But he could not help looking back. The hall door was still open and a yellow band of light was falling into the park. Maria Petrovna was stand-

ing on the porch, and her thin, motionless black figure was clearly silhouetted in the doorway.

All the way to Moscow, Safonov could not calm down; he was tormented by a burning, intolerable sense of shame. He thought of Vitya Snegiryov, Shekhter, Samoilov, with all of whom he had once studied for long years, and he wanted to get their addresses and write them angry, blistering letters. But he did not know where they lived. Then he wanted to write a long letter of apology to Maria Petrovna but realized with horror and despair that he did not know her house number.

At a big station, Safonov, glum and agitated, left the carriage. He went into the post office and, after a moment's hesitation, sent a telegram to Maria Petrovna at the school. The message consisted of two words:

Forgive us!

1977

Translated by Alex Miller

FYODOR ABRAMOV

(1920-1983)

Fyodor Abramov published his first novel, "Brothers and Sisters", in 1958. It was the first part of the novel in three books, "The Pryaslins", for which he received the State Prize.

Abramov was in his third year at Leningrad University when the war began. He joined the Home Guard, was gravely wounded and demobilized. After the war he taught at the university, and later headed the chair of Russian literature.

The Second World War made the main theme of his work. "At the end of the winter of 1942, I was gravely wounded and evacuated from besieged Leningrad," wrote Fyodor Abramov. "After an endless series of hospitals, I finally reached the impenetrable forests of Arkhangelsk, which to me meant home. Those were grim days. Down in the Pinega, a battle for life, for survival was being fought. There

were no bursting shells, no whistling bullets, but there was frightening want, hard toil, and 'fallen in battle' notifications brought by the postman. There was men's work to be done in the fields and the meadows, but it was shouldered by half-starving women, children and their grandfathers. That summer, I saw much grief and suffering. But what I saw even more of were fortitude, endurance and the generosity of the Russian heart."

Abramov made it his aim to fathom the Russian character in order to uncover the fount of that inexhaustible moral strength which enabled the Soviet people to triumph over the enemy. And he did trace it back to the staunchness, unshakable courage and loyalty to the Motherland which had shaped the national character at the dawn of history and had been tenderly cultivated by the new socialist system.

*THE HAPPIEST WOMAN**

When father died he left a whole houseful of childer, and all of 'em lasses save only Tikhon. And not a handful of meal in the bins. Ma toiled and moiled day and night till she was like to have run away in sweat but little did she get by it, the bread-box allus gaped empty.

Well, the long and the short of it was that we had to go out and earn our bread. Tikhon went to town and me, at twelve, I went to be a servant in a monastery. Aye, and it was nine years I was in that hell. Nine years I did all the washing for those bearded devils.

They'd wake me at three o'clock in the morn and I'd stand at that wash-tub till eight at night, and at the end I couldn't see straight or feel my hands and feet. My hands were raw with lye, red as pigeons' feet. They begrudged soap, them monks did, it was lye all the time. And rinsing in winter through a hole in the ice on the river—a good master wouldn't put his dog out of the house in that frost, and me going to the river to rinse twenty-five wash-baskets-ful. And at the end of the month I'd get a ruble for it all.

That's how they treated me in yon holy place. Sometimes ma would come, she'd cry but she could do aught and she went as she came, because there was naught for me to go home to, anyway.

But mind you, however bad things are, youth is youth, and come Sunday I'd be off out somewere. You look at me now—a fine beauty I am, fit to scare the crows. But I was a comely wench in those days. When I passed, the labourers would gawk and grin, and going along the monastery corridors them monks would be trying to get a nip at my breast. There was times I gave them such a punch

in their hairy mugs, they went down like an ill-made sheaf.

A fine hearty lass I was, I hadn't been behind the door when God gave out health. I could still carry a sack of flour at sixty. But I couldn't hold out against my old man, only he wasn't an old man then, a fine lad he was, and he won me with just a look. I'd tossed off all the rest, the monks and the labourers, like puppies, but he—he just had to look at me and I was his, couldn't move hand or foot.

So I got me a bun in the oven.

Naught to do, my own fault. Ma and I sat and cried—we couldn't do a thing and as for telling Olexei—that's my old man—it never came into my head. His folks was well off, he was the best catch in the village, what'd he want with Olena's lass. No dowry to her, and couldn't keep her gate locked at that. In the old days they were strict about a maid's honour, not like these times.

But Olexei found out and off he went to his parents with "This is the way of it, Father and Mother, I won't have any but Olena's lass."

They tried to talk him out of it, and his father took the stick to him—he had a hot temper—but Olexei stood firm: there's none comes under my hand save only Okulka.

His father flared up.

"So that's your talk? Go against father and mother, would you? Then live as you will. I'll give you naught."

He didn't, neither. For three years we lived in a sooty bath-house. For three years we choked on smoke. What d'you think I used for a kneading trough? The tub they washed in.

Before going to bed, Olexei'd say, "Sing, wife!" And would you believe it, all my life I'd never sung like that. All the village 'ud come out to listen. "Naught to wonder at if Okulka sings," they'd say, "why shouldn't she, she's known naught better, a servant since she was a little 'un. But what has Olexei to be merry about?"

Olexei and me, we soon got on our feet. We built us a house. Did it ourselves and it was a house to marvel at. I worked as his mate, under the logs and on top of them. Aye, I lifted logs together with Olexei and sat with him on the corners with an axe. And folks stared till their

eyes popped, a woman wielding an axe—none had ever seen such a thing or heard tell of it.

Well, we'd built the house and we were doing right well, when the old man, Olexei's father that is, came to us.

He'd gotten feeble then and blind too, and who needs one like that? His three sons wouldn't have him, go to Olexei, they said, you haven't lived with him yet. But how could he ask Olexei to take him in when he'd put him out of doors and not given him a brass farthing?

Well, so I comes out one morning and who should I see sitting in the porch? Who but father-in-law. He didn't dare knock, so he just sat there. And it was cold. Winter. The time of the hardest frosts.

I took his hand and brought him in and sat him in the warmest place. And then I gave him something to eat and drink and fixed the bath-house for him to wash because he'd got lice, too, and he cried like a babe.

"Forgive me, forgive me, Okulina," he says, "I done you wrong, I can't reward your goodness but may God reward you."

I don't rightly know if the old man's prayers brought me happiness (he was a very pious old man, not like me, the monastery slavey as they called me in the village), but anyway, the life I've had, I could call myself the happiest woman in the village. I had four men fighting in the war, my husband and three sons, and every one of them came back. But all Olexei's brothers stayed there. And naught strange in that, since only a handful in all the village returned, but mine—all four. Now, wouldn't you call me the happiest woman?

1939, 1980

Translated by Eve Manning

GEORGI SEMYONOV

(b. 1931)

Georgi Semyonov published his first books some twenty years ago. From the outset he demonstrated his skill in psychological analysis and outlined the range of themes to which his work was to be devoted.

His material may be divided into a "city" and a "forest" theme. This is not new in Russian literature, but Semyonov handles it in a novel way. He shows how the complexity of the modern world affects the character and the very soul of people, and how an urge awakens in

them to come closer to the simple and clear world of nature. In his stories the woods, the fields, the steppe and the sea are as important as the personages themselves, playing their active part in their relationship with man.

An artist of subtle understanding, Semyonov finds that even ordinary-seeming situations contain big moral and philosophical problems.

*REQUIEM**

During that gentle period in early summer when the lilies of the valley have not yet faded in the cool May woods, there are occasional hot sunny days which can be described as "heady"—so heady, in fact, as to cause pain. A heavy aroma rises from damp earth, blossoming plants and the green leaves on the trees, and the warm, scented air is filled with vibrant bird songs, warbling, trilling, twittering, the call of the cuckoo and the buzzing of insects. Someone who arrives from the stone- and asphalt-clad city streets to this bubbling cauldron of life soon begins to feel a dull pain in his stupefied head, and there is no medicine that can cure it. Everything around him is so beautiful. And yet there's this headache!

Val, as Valentin Kozyrev still called himself in the secret, time-untouched recesses of his soul—though he was no longer young, but a man of experience with the rank of colonel in the air force—never used any sort of medicine or carried anything with him in case of illness. Yet here he was, tormented by a pain pounding in his head like heavy cobble-stones.

His orange-coloured car, dusty with travel, stood in a forest glade which was filled with the yellow sunshine of buttercups. Dark little pine-trees stood out against this piercing yellow, and young birches with their round white trunks grew in families all over the glade, just as if they were great, spreading white bushes. The muffled sound of the road came from beyond the forest and one could distinctly hear cars driving on to the bridge that spanned the river.

The glade was pitted with old trenches which in the course of time had become long, shallow ditches overgrown with wild flowers and bushes.

Somewhere here, in this forest, or even in this glade, long, long ago Kozyrev's father had been killed.

This was where he had fought his last battle. It was here, where Valentin Kozyrev now stood, a paunchy middle-aged man in a blue track suit. Because of the headache and the brightness of the sun he screwed up his somewhat tired grey eyes; his gaze, like that of all pilots, was intent. It was here, where his car was now standing with his wife beside it preparing dinner on a paraffin stove; she had already managed to pick a bunch of large, pearl-white lilies of the valley, and had squeezed them tightly into a china mug.

"Go away!" she said to a bee flying above her, and she waved her hand at it. "Don't bother me, go away... Val," she called to her husband, "drive this bee away. It's a menace I can't peel the potatoes. Go away!" she shouted at it. "Go away! Val, please... I'm afraid of it..."

The Germans had come from that side of the river, and the Soviet forces, for as long as they were able, had held this bank, knowing that though they could not stop the enemy, they would at least delay him here, on the high, wooded bank, so well suited for defence.

Every time Kozyrev came here on the anniversary of his father's death, he looked intently at the low-lying opposite bank with its occasional bushes looking like haystacks.

With a kind of hostile suspicion he would look at the other side of the river, involuntarily putting himself in his father's place. There he had been in the heat of battle, while all the time someone was aiming at him from the opposite bank, bent on killing him.

Kozyrev did not know how all this had happened.

The earth on this bank was full of rusty metal, bullets and white bones. Even in the river Kozyrev had seen through the glass of an underwater mask a golden yellow shin-bone glittering suddenly in the grey silt under the river bank among the bare roots of a willow-bush bent low over the water. And once, as he had been coming up from the river along the steep, sandy bank, he had stumbled, catching his foot on a mouldering, yellowish-grey pelvis-bone that revealed itself to his gaze, just as if someone was trying to remind the living of the dead again and again.

Everything here constantly reminded him of the long ago battle in which his father was killed.

When the nearby little district town had decided to light an eternal flame in memory of an unknown soldier, it was precisely here that they had unearthed, with all the honours proper to such an occasion, the remains of a young man with white, incredibly clean, beautiful teeth, their jewel-like enamel brilliantly preserved, and they had carried these remains to the centre of the town and placed them under a grey marble gravestone.

It was then that a half rotted, torn overcoat with a rusty stain from an officer's metal button which had disintegrated in the earth had been thrown out of the ground. Someone had flung the coat on to a thin, little pine-sapling. A bird took a fancy to the sad heap of rags and built a nest in one of its folds.

This had happened two years ago, but no one had ever destroyed the nest, or even touched the hideous remnants of that overcoat with its hardened sleeve hanging down to the ground. In those distant dark days the coat had presumably warmed some young lieutenant fighting here together with Kozyrev's father.

The little pine-tree, weighed down by its heavy burden, managed to survive by thrusting its pale green top from under the overcoat's sleeve, and now this lonely monument beside the forest road had somehow become eternal, entering into the hearts and memories of the people who passed by. Snow and rain, sun and wind will one day bring down the pathetic rags; they will fall as dead leaves to the ground, grass will grow over them, the salts of the earth dissolve them. Only the crooked pine-tree will perhaps attract the attention of some unknown person in the future, who of course will not know what had caused the wayward bend in the resinous trunk.

On this occasion, as soon as he arrived, Kozyrev at once found that earthy-grey, apparently fossilized sculpture. As last year, a little blue-tit flashed out of a deep fold, fluttering her half-transparent wings as she flew away: clearly, somewhere in those dusty folds she had a family to feed and was going about it quietly and warily. He stood in deep thought, and photographed the overcoat

several times from all sides, conscious of the hopelessness of his attempts to commit all this grief to paper.

And suddenly he saw the light, scaly candles which adorned the neighbouring pine-trees. The dark green branches rising to heaven in pious prayer and homage, shone with those waxen fingers, immobile in the mystic, resounding silence of the forest. Every pine-tree and every branch carried those light green candles lit by the sun, and it seemed to Kozyrev, who had felt a cold shiver run over him, that all this quiet beauty, exuding a resinous fragrance, all this blessedness, existed not of itself, as it did in reality, but for the sake of the ragged, ancient overcoat, an ossified symbol of suffering which had survived its owner, and lived on as a witness to the world of the torment the dying young man had endured.

His father was twenty-nine when the war started. Val Kozyrev was only six, and he did not remember him well. It made him very sad that he could not imagine his father as a young man with a cigarette between his laughing lips: in his mind's eye he always saw him as some stern warrior, sombrely gazing out from under the metal edge of a helmet. Especially here, on the spot where he had perished, within the circle of these scented pines, each branch tipped with young light-green candles. The birches that grew here were also special—very white, as if they had been powdered, with hardly any black on their bark. The leaves on their branches had already come out, but were still small, and the sun shone brightly right through them. The birches seemed transparent and unnaturally festive against the lacquered yellow of the buttercups in the glade.

Immediately beyond the glade and beyond a blue patch of sky, under a steep bank, ran the river, which could not be seen from here, and which was not yet clear after the spring thaw. The bushes turning green on the banks were still cluttered with river rubbish, and the banks were dirty.

Everything here had long been familiar to Kozyrev. He came here often, beginning every year in May, when the forest road had dried and no night frosts gripped the ground. In the summer wild strawberries ripened here, and they took baskets of them away. (They had special baskets for wild strawberries, clean and not large, stained on the inside

with the juice of the berries.) And in the autumn there were mushrooms, which they stored for the whole winter: they dried them, marinaded them, salted them, packed them in jars and treated their guests to them in the winter. After long years of service in the salt marshes he and his wife could never tire of mushroom picking and were so devoted to it that they could not even imagine their life without this joyous occupation.

Their life in this glade was going on as calmly and unhurriedly as ever. His wife prepared their dinner, laid a cloth on the folding table, set out the plates—the ordinary china they used at home. Steaming, yellowish potatoes and rissoles, prepared at home, appeared on the plates. Val Kozyrev got the vodka out of the icebag, and also the shining metal cups. He settled down on a rickety chair and was about to pour out the cold vodka, when suddenly the crackle of a dry branch was heard in the thick pines, followed by someone's noisy, unceremonious, even somewhat insolent footsteps.

A man in a flat cloth cap, an old suit and blue gym shoes stepped out into the glade. He appeared to be about fifty. Greying bristle covered his cheeks and chin, turning black on the neck, as if smeared with dirt. He was swarthy, and his hands, as he approached awkwardly muttering imprecations of some sort, seemed to Kozyrev to be covered in shining, sweaty mordant stains. He had apparently been walking for a long time: the veins on his hands were swollen, and his fingers were big and puffy, filled with a rude vigour that was emphasized by the black lining under his unkempt nails.

"Look here, what a business," he began with the same strange awkwardness. "I search and I search—and I can't find it. It was here somewhere. I went to Greshnevo, where was Kozlovka, I said. I asked the old men, they didn't know either. What a business! Why, I ask them. Why don't you know Kozlovka? And then I found out. Greshnevo was built after the war, the old inhabitants did not come back, and these came from all over the place. Their history starts in 1946. They don't know anything of what was here before, what villages... Don't even know the names. This is the second day I've been tramping around here... Interest-

ing! Gone, as if it had fallen through the ground... Well, hullo! I'm butting in. Go on with your dinner... You're not local? I'll just ask you one question, and then I'll be off... I came here on a motor-bike, and left it in the forest... I'll find it all right," he said with conviction. "If only I could find the village... What a business! " He gave a laugh showing his large, yellow teeth. "There was a village here somewhere, you see... But you're having dinner," and he waved Kozyrev away, as if Kozyrev had invited him to the table. "Don't pay any attention... I go about here, and if I meet anyone I ask them if they happen to know about Kozlovka. I see you are not local people. I'm sorry if I've said the wrong thing. Somehow it's interesting... After all I was born here, lived here before the war, and now nobody knows anything about Kozlovka. I thought maybe there was something left. I've been meaning to come for a long time, all my life, actually. But how could I get here? Now I've bought the bike, I thought I ought to go to my homeland. And instead of my homeland there's a forest. That's it." And again he laughed, spreading out his arms. "And the main thing is that no one I've asked has heard anything. They look at me as if I were a fool. I tell them I was born in Kozlovka! Kozlovka was right on this bank of the river. Somewhere here, about two kilometres from the bridge. After all, I remember it. I'm not an idiot. But no one believes me. There's no Kozlovka, and that's all. There isn't, but there was. But one can't prove to people that Kozlovka was here... I wasn't born in the forest after all. They should understand."

The caution with which Kozyrev, and particularly his wife, had reacted to the unexpected visitor, turned into extreme curiosity, and Kozyrev even knitted his brows with studied severity to hide the sudden upsurge of feeling.

"Don't you hurry away, sit down," he said, getting up. "Please sit down," he repeated in a tone that did not brook opposition and which he customarily used when talking to subordinates in his long years of service. "We could say you and I are fellow-countrymen... No, don't get excited... I don't know your Kozlovka either. No, that's not what I want to say. No, you sit down. I'll just get a glass... a moment..."

"I can't, no way! I'm on a bike. I can't, you understand, not allowed. Or I might go spinning off somewhere. And I won't even sit down. Go on with your dinner, and I better go."

"You're not going anywhere! I won't let you. Right here, just where we are standing, or somewhere in the vicinity, my father was killed... His bones lie somewhere round here. I, don't know where... Sit down immediately," he ordered the confused stranger. "You don't have to drink. My wife will make some tea in a minute, you'll have tea and sweets. She's called Lyuba, and I'm just Val."

"Well, all right, I'll sit for a bit, and what about you? Will you stand? No, that's not right. I'll sit on the grass. I'll sit like this," he said, sitting down on the ground and taking off his cap with the worn peak, and baring his white forehead. "And if there's tea, I won't refuse. And I'll have a sweet, thank you. You say somewhere round here, is that so? Your father. Yes, yes. We're kind of kin, one thinks of it. Men of one soil. Why not? My grandfathers also lie in this ground... The main thing is this," he shook himself, opening wide his small eyes, "everybody knows the cemetery. We had the cemetery in Boinevo. There was a church and a churchyard. That's where our people from Kozlovka were buried. There are plenty of our there. But no one knows about Kozlovka. Daft, isn't it? People are so stupid. They don't believe me. Ours were more understanding."

"Well, of course they were," Kozyrev said teasing him. "What's your name and patronymic?"

"Evgeni Konstantinovich," the man replied quickly.

"Well now, Evgeni Konstantinovich," Kozyrev said, although he had called himself Val. "I'll have a drink, if you don't mind. It's my habit. For the good of his soul." And silently he emptied the tiny metal cup into his mouth. "There," he added. "Tell us your story. Would you like a rissole? They're good rissoles, my wife made them. You're not thinking of your figure? Extraordinary man, refuses everything. Well, that's up to you. Tell us, Evgeni Konstantinovich, I beg you. You once lived here, and was everything like it is now, or have there been changes?"

"Of course there have been changes!" exclaimed the

astonished Evgeni Konstantinovich. "Everything has changed. I would not go wandering about the forest if everything had remained as it was. The point is that this forest wasn't here before."

"What?"

"This is how it was. There was a slight hill. The village was like Greshnevo, only better. Kozlovka was not very big either. As for houses, there must have been..."

"No, wait a minute. Think before you speak. What do you mean there wasn't a forest? Where did it come from then?"

"It grew. Thirty years and more have passed. Why shouldn't it have grown? Of course there was a forest; if you ever walked far over there, you'd have seen big old pines and birches. That's where the forest started. And somewhere round here there were houses and vegetable gardens, and I remember that over there, closer to the forest, there was a barn, and in front of it a small square where we had dances. I was a youngster, of course, hadn't a chance to wear out my boots dancing, but I used to go along and have a look. As for these," and he nodded towards the young pines and birches, "they can't be more than twenty years old. One can say that there was nothing here. Well, not nothing, there were lilacs growing, some people had apple-trees, there were rowan-trees over there, and that sort of thing, same as in any village, like everyone has."

This information absolutely shook Kozyrev, as he had always for some reason believed that the young pine-trees had witnessed the battle.

"Well, yes, of course... I understand," he said, exchanging glances with his wife. "No, of course, I don't. Aren't you muddling something, Evgeni Konstantinovich? Perhaps your village wasn't here, perhaps it ... perhaps if you walk along the bank, there's a ploughed field on the left... Perhaps that's where it used to be?"

"No, I remember that field. It was always there. And beyond the field there's a spring in the ravine. That's all as it was. But the village was here somewhere," and he looked round in bewilderment. "It's got to be somewhere here... I don't even know. If only some bit of a house had been left, an odd brick from a stove. Not a trace! Somewhere

here. Perhaps even here in this glade. Who can tell? The only way now to find out would be by excavating. Later on perhaps, in a thousand years people..."

"And where was the battle?" asked Kozyrev naively, as a child.

"The battle was everywhere," replied Evgeni Konstantinovich with conviction. "Here and there, and by the bridge. Only we were no longer here, us and our Mum. We ran off for all we were worth while the warm weather lasted, and the Germans did not catch us. We ran as far as Ryazan Region, on to Korablinsky district, and there we ran out of warm clothes, fell ill, and the cold weather started. We had a hard time of it, but we managed somehow. Of course not much joy to anyone we were. We arrived ragged, ready to go begging for charity in the street; my mother had three of us. Thank God, we could dig up what was left of the potatoes in the fields. It was hard, that's all one can say. Later mother died, and we settled there. My elder sister also died later after an abortion. Had it done secretly by some old woman, and died. And then I got married there, and that's how I live, bought a motorbike. But I wanted to come back here. I can remember everything very well. How we used to run about here ... geese, and dogs... We bathed... Well, what do children want? We had every sort of amusement. All the same, I wanted to come back... I thought I'd come back and it would be interesting to see what had happened, how people were living here... I thought I might even meet someone I knew, one of my boyhood playmates... You know, I thought," he said with embarrassment, "why not go on my motor-bike to my own village. They'd say—Hullo, here's our Goryukhin back again... Anyone who used to live here would remember me. But no one's come back. They're all dead. Or scattered like us and our mother. Oh, what's the good of talking?.. And who may you be, and where are you from? You've got a Moscow registration number. And what's your profession?"

"He's in the army," Kozyrev's wife answered for him.

"That means you're a regular. And what's your rank?"

"Colonel," she replied again to her husband's annoyance.

"So what?" Kozyrev waved her remark aside.

Suddenly the man fell silent, stood up, and started gently shaking off his trousers the twigs and other rubbish that had stuck to the grey material.

"Why have you got up?" asked Kozyrev looking at him thoughtfully. "Why, Evgeni Konstantinovich?"

"Why not?" the other replied grinning and giving a sort of bow. "One should know when to go. I've stayed too long, I'd say, and I apologize."

"But what about tea? Look, the kettle's already boiling," said Kozyrev, not noticing the change in his guest's behaviour. "You talk well, Evgeni Konstantinovich. Tell us something else. How did they live here? How do you live now? You've plenty of time as you haven't found your Kozlovka. Stay a bit longer."

"We live well now. We're pleased with our life. There are of course some defects, Comrade Colonel, and what I have in mind is that when a man comes home from work, I'd like to say that not enough is done to enable him to rest in a cultured way. And there are lots of possibilities. Or, for instance, take women's stockings. They're only made of nylon or kapron thread, and that makes the feet sweat, and incidentally, it always makes women's legs look bare, if you'll forgive me, and they're as smooth as anything. That's not good. It seems as if they've forgotten about ordinary cotton stockings which are better for working in, as first of all you don't get tired, and secondly, there's the haymaking. Women are embarrassed to go into the hayfields in trousers, for instance, and you can't turn hay in nylon—and so they go about with bare legs. Maybe you make speeches somewhere, and something should be said about this. If you turn hay over with bare knees you'll itch and be sore. But no one has time for that sort of thing. I won't mention other defects. We have a great many resources. A helluva lot of them, one might say. Excuse me, of course. But we need a better management. Resources, Good Lord! Wherever you look—there they are. And what's the use? We go on living, and here are these untapped resources. I'm a small man, but I can see for myself. And what's to be done if no one wants to work properly... Or there isn't any initiative. If there's initiative..."

"Wait a moment, " protested Kozyrev. "What resources?

What initiative? You tell me about Kozlovka. Give him some tea quickly, Lyuba, he seems to be off making speeches."

"I'm sorry of course," continued Evgeni Konstantinovich, "but how can I show any initiative if I don't respect the manager? I'm not beating about the bush. I'm speaking frankly. If I had some respect it would be another matter. I'd respect a good man, but why should I respect a drunkard? Aren't I right? And what's the result? Nobody wants anything. And here are all these resources, but in my village there's no real manager."

Kozyrev almost used force to make him sit down on the chair. His guest protested as much as he could, and was very embarrassed.

Finally he made an effort, and drank his tea, and ate a sweet, doing all this with obvious difficulty, and of course without getting any pleasure from the tea, while the colonel, who had opened the door of the car and was sitting on the edge of the front seat, regarded him sternly and also drank his tea in silence.

"Marvellous tea," Evgeni Konstantinovich said at last with relief. "Thank you. And now, if you'll excuse me, it's time for me to go." He got up from the little table unhappily, knocked it with his knee, and was so terribly confused that he even grew red in the face. "It's time, Comrade Colonel," he pleaded. "It looks as if there'll be thunderstorm, and my motor-bike is under a bush. I'll tell you, there's nothing to be said about Kozlovka—a village like any other village. Somewhere round here... We were children... Made bonfires, baked potatoes. Caught fish with crooks."

"With what?"

"Crooks," Evgeni Konstantinovich repeated uncertainly, listening to the word.

"You mean hooks! Crook indeed!" Kozyrev teased him.

Evgeni Konstantinovich laughed, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"What does it matter, Comrade Colonel. So long as you catch the fish, a hook or a crook. Everyone in Kozlovka said 'crook'. I'd just like to ask you, who was your father? Was he an officer?"

"He was a soldier, Evgeni Konstantinovich, a rank-and-

file soldier," Kozyrev replied. "All right, go, if you really have to. You've turned my soul inside out, don't you see? I thought there was always a forest here, but you say there was that Kozlovka here. An interesting development," he concluded with a gloomy sort of sigh. "All right, brother, good-bye. Crook off!" He laughed in farewell.

When Evgeni Konstantinovich had gone, hurriedly and somehow angrily crashing underfoot the dry pine-cones, suddenly there came from beyond the forest a short clattering burst of thunder.

It seemed as if there had not been a cloud in the clear sky. It was only in the west that it was murky, so that when Kozyrev glanced in that direction he seemed to be looking through dusty glass. Yet quite high up, some six or seven thousand metres, Kozyrev guessed, almost under the sun, the silver nimbus of enormous clouds, heaped up and kneaded into smooth dough, could be glimpsed in the blue haze. The clouds themselves were still indiscernible in the sky, unrevealed and as weightless as dust.

Kozyrev gave a whistle of surprise, and his wife smiled uncertainly.

All their feelings, all the sounds with which their hearts were filled, were suddenly hushed like birds in a forest. Though they were still wrapped in the heat of the forest calm, they began to hear some strange mutterings, as if distant voices—now receding, dying away, then suddenly reapproaching—swelled into screaming abuse, heart-rending shrieks, deep growls. These strange noises borne by the thick, stagnant air were made by swarms of flying insects—flies, mosquitoes, bumble-bees, bees and wasps. It seemed as if somewhere beyond the forest, somewhere far, far away, on the edge of the world, excited people were shouting and arguing about something, especially when a grey fly with a brick-red head would burst through the veil of distance and, having frenziedly whirled around, settle down on the table leg. Another of the same species with the same mad excitement and liveliness would unexpectedly fly on to a squatting fly, and they both would rise up like devils, gyrating in the air filled with the barely audible, polyphonic buzzing of flying, swirling, settling insects chasing one another. For all their aimless anima-

tion, they were probably hurrying to finish some business nature had allotted to them before the thunder and the rain, and yet it seemed that they were only playing, dancing in the air in an excess of life force and irresponsibility, as if it were only they who owned this huge green world, warmed by the sun, and were its all-powerful masters.

But when the cannonades of thunder were followed by heavy white rain shot through by the sun, everything living hid.

The Kozyrevs, too, took shelter.

Powerful shining streams crashed straight down on to the car. Through the torrents of water streaking down the glass, snakey, stealthy, unexpected lightning burst up in convulsive flares, while at the same time thunder, muffled inside the car, groaned and muttered in the sky. In this rain, in this grey stream of raindrops that had at last shut out the sun, Kozyrev saw a mosquito flying slowly, picking its way between the threads of rain, helped by invisible air currents.

Kozyrev's heart ached for the desperate flying insect in its misfortune, and he followed its flight for a long time, as he waited patiently for the storm to subside.

The storm abated as all storms do, moving off beyond the wet, golden forest now lit up by the sun. The clouds hung in the distance, dark, sea-blue. Everything around was wet, mercilessly trampled, crushed and flattened. The buttercups shut up their flowers against the rain, and the glade now seemed hostile and cold.

It would of course have been possible to pack everything up and drive home quickly—they would still have got to Moscow before dark. But they lingered because of the vodka he had drunk. Having been dealing all his life with machines, Kozyrev could not be careless on this occasion. In any case his wife would not have allowed him to take the wheel, even if he had decided to drive. And he knew there was no arguing with her.

In the small army town in the steppes in which he and his wife had spent more than twenty years, their friends used to assure him jokingly that he was afraid of Lyuba,

and he would reply, also as a joke: "I'm not afraid of her. Why should I be? I'm afraid of losing her. That's what I'm afraid of." They seemed not to understand him, or to treat his words merely as a pun.

But he was in fact afraid. All his life he had been afraid of losing this patient, loving woman, who was ready for every sort of sacrifice, disappointment and loss, could comfort him in difficult moments, was fond of people, and was affectionate, very hospitable and joyously busy. He had taken her away from a well-to-do Moscow family, and she had given up everything for him—university education, a future career, the comfortable life in the capital that awaited her, her parents who wept and begged her to stay and who took her decision as a terrible blow of fate—all this she had given up for the bare steppe with a reed-choked river that dried up in summer, susliks and salt marshes, where among the dusty grey poplars stood blue and pink, carelessly put together pre-fabs. She gave up everything for her Val, who jokingly called her "my navigator" for the sake of rare but happy evenings when guests would gather in their cozy home and Lyuba, glowing with excitement, as if it were the happiest moments of her life, would set on the table fragrant, fried ducks shot by Val; it is, of course, common knowledge that ducks do not walk about on dry ground, so beside the ducks bottles of red and white wine, brought from Moscow, would be ranged, as well as vodka, also brought from Moscow and infused with cranberry, St. John's wort or poplar buds, and poured into fancy-shaped whisky or gin bottles. Lyuba would put on one of her best dresses—the dark blue with polka dots and a white lace collar, or her olive green, or even her grandest, brightest one, crimson with long wide kimono sleeves; she would brush her reddish hair upwards, arranging it in waves on her head, and would apply green or blue eye shadow to her excited, brilliant eyes. Recordings were played continuously in the apartment. And there was never an occasion when anyone felt sad or tense on these evenings. There were none of the scenes now common in many houses—half drunk men tightly squeezing themselves into a little kitchen, while worried, angry women are left round the débris of a table in another

room. Everything was always so pleasant in the Kozyrev house that no one ever had to be persuaded to visit them.

When he was transferred to Moscow, women wept at their farewell evening, sitting at table with swollen red eyes, and the men too were sad, however hard Lyuba might try to amuse them. That time, she herself, a stou-tish forty-year-old woman, could not remain calm and burst into tears.

And now in the misty forest glade, overshadowed by darkness, as they remained alone in this deserted May wood, Kozyrev not so much recalled all this, but rather experienced a quiet melancholy, a kind of excruciating but happy suffering. He stood alone while Lyuba was laying out their bed in the car, crawling about on all fours in the confined space lit by a yellow lamp.

It was wet and desolate all round. Great drops had collected on the roof, the windows and the bonnet of the car, and bulged and shone on the sweaty surface of its body.

The night was setting in cold and damp. The birds that had burst into song after the rain were silent. Not a nightingale was heard. The wet forest could be heard rustling and squelching, and there was the sound of raindrops falling from the branches. Mist gathered over the glade, hiding the pits and hillocks. And because of that the dark forest towered above the ground, and seemed suspended in silent flight, breaking the laws of gravity—a forest of which there had been no sign on the day his father was killed. There had only been the deserted village of Kozlovka by that time most likely ruined and scorched by shells. There had been bare, frozen earth, and somewhere his warm, loving father had still been alive. Kozyrev now imagined him as a frightened boy, huddled down on the cold earth which was about to swallow him up in its insatiable maw.

If only his father could now suddenly have appeared before him in his mystic half-awake, half-asleep state, and had recognized his ageing son and known that on the

earth in which he lay lived his descendant, who remembered, loved and pitied him! Most important of all, if only his father could realize that Russians were prospering on his land, and his death had not been in vain. His father would have been pleased, so Kozyrev now thought, to have known this and to see his son, who had come here in his own car—something he himself had never dared dream about.

The gloomy forest hovering over the whitish mist seemed to augur ill, concealing a watchful silence in the damp thickets.

The car, shining dimly as if lit up from inside by a candle, seemed to Kozyrev to be either a foreign, unearthly contraption of some sort descended from the skies into that misty glade, or a lonely hermit's cell in the midst of a desert. Yet it was actually the car that was the only comforting reality, and there it was, warm and dry, and in it one could shelter, as in one's home, from the deathly quiet, cold forest hanging silently above the earth. Single, strange, smacking sounds came from here and there in the depths of the forest, as raindrops fell from the wet branches.

"Val," his wife's muffled voice could be heard from inside the car. "Va-al."

Kozyrev started with surprise—the sound of this human voice calling him seemed to come sadly and indistinctly from underground. For a moment he was disorientated, his head went round, and in order to take hold of himself, he looked up at the faint stars as at the shining control panel, trying to find his place in the universe; there was the Polar Star, the Great Bear, the famous triangle...

"I'm coming," he replied quietly, as he looked searchingly at the misty darkness of the forest.

He thought, with a sad smile of disbelief, that once upon a time lads in great coats were killed here, and now on the place where they died young pine-trees had grown, and the particles of dust that once had been their bodies were rising up with the trees to the sun. It seemed to him that there came an hour in the life of this forest when all the trees in the misty night came to life and, enchanted, quietly rose up above the flowering earth.

With a timid smile he went back to his car, and asked with glad excitement:

"Well, what are you doing?"

"Where did you get to?" asked Lyuba.

"I was just standing and thinking. Were you frightened without me?"

"No... but you know... there was a village... and these people that used to live here... this earth..."

"There's nothing to be afraid of here," Kozyrev said. "This is my land! Why should you suddenly be afraid?"

The car smelt of lilies of the valley.

The dark, disturbing glow of the misty night shimmered through the beads of vapour on the windows. Far away in the north this would be the time of the white nights and their mysterious light spread throughout the northern hemisphere like the wings of a white owl, and glimmered even here, over this battle-scarred earth.

The burnt village of Kozlovka, overgrown by the forest and forgotten by human beings, rose like a ghost in the mist. All round there were old trenches that had long fallen in and been overgrown with grass, and common graves filled with the bones of fallen soldiers, and among them, somewhere, lay the bones of his father.

1979

Translated by Olive Stevens

KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

(1892-1968)

Konstantin Paustovsky published his first stories in 1912. Enriched by the experience of the First World War and the Civil War, by his long wanderings about the country and trying his hand at different jobs, Paustovsky returned to writing in 1921, which he now realized was his lifework. All his best stories: "Kara Bugaz" (1932), "Colchis" (1934), "The Northern Tale" (1938), "A Story of Life" (1945-1963), "The Golden Rose" (1955) to mention but a few are infused with a lyrical attitude to life.

The critic Galina Trofimova says: "Paustovsky's first-hand knowledge of ordinary Russian people, their rich language and deep love of their native land, has won him readers from all walks of life. It has given strength and vitality to his 'Meshchora Country' (1939), a cycle of sketches about the countryside and people of Central Russia, and the lyrical stories and sketches that he wrote from the 1930s onwards."

People are constantly plagued with regrets of some kind or other—over big things, small things, serious or ridiculous things. As for me, I frequently regret that I did not become a botanist and do not know all the plants in Central Russia. There are an awful lot of them, of course, more than a thousand at a rough estimate. But just imagine how interesting it would be to know all these trees, shrubs and flowers and their different properties!

Time rushes past with such unjustifiable haste that this must be our greatest regret of all. Before you know where you are summer is fading, that “irretrievable” summer which is associated in nearly everyone’s mind with memories of childhood.

In a flash youth has passed, old age is creeping on and you have still not seen the tiniest fraction of the enchantment that life has cast around you. Each day, sometimes each hour, brings with it regrets. They waken in the morning, but do not always subside at night. On the contrary, they sometimes flare up at night and there is no sedative that will quieten them. Together with the strongest regret of all about the rapid flight of time, there is another one, as sticky as pine resin. This is the feeling that one has not been able, and perhaps never will be, to see the world in all its amazing and mysterious variety.

What am I saying, the world, when time and health do not even permit you to get to know your own country. For instance, I have never seen Baikal, the island of Va-laam, Lermontov’s estate in Tarkhany or the broad monotonous expanses of the Ob near its mouth by the small town

of Salekhard which used to be called Obdorsk.

To the Russian ear the very name Obdorsk suggests something bleak, some uninhabited northern clime immersed in remote melancholy, and dense mists.

Going over the places I have seen convinces me that I have seen very little. But if you think of these places in terms of their quality, their essence, and not in terms of quantity, the picture is more encouraging. You can see a remarkable lot even if you spend your whole life sitting on the same spot. It is just a matter of having a keen, searching eye. We all know that the tiniest drop of water can reflect a kaleidoscope of light and colour, right down to a multitude of completely different shades of green in the foliage of the elder or the bird-cherry, the lime and the alder. Incidentally, alder leaves are like the palms of young children's hands with their plumpness between the thin veins.

A mere ten kilometres from the log house where I live each summer there is one of the greatest, though little-known spots in the whole of Russia. In my opinion the word "great" is just as relevant to some of these places in our country as it is to events and people. We obviously dislike exalted feelings because we do not know how to express them, and we put up with dry officialese to avoid the accusation of being sentimental. In spite of this many people, myself included, feel like saying "the great fields of Borodino" not simply the "fields of Borodino", just as people were not afraid of saying in the old days "the great sun of Austerlitz".

Great events naturally leave their mark on the countryside. We are aware of a special solemnity in nature in the fields of Borodino and hear its vibrant silence. This silence returned here after the bloody battles of the last war and since then no one has disturbed it.

The place I want to tell you about has a simple name, like many other magnificent spots in Russia. It is called Ilyinsky Waters, and to me this name is just as attractive as Bezhin Lug or Zolotoi Plyoss near Kineshma. It is not associated with any historical events or famous people,

but simply expresses the true nature of the Russian countryside. Thus it is "typical", even "classical" as people like to put it.

Places such as these have an incredibly powerful effect on one's emotions. It is only fear of being accused of sentimentality that stops me from adding that these places are serene, soothing and have a holy quality about them. Pushkin was right when he spoke of the "holy twilight" in the gardens of Tsarskoye Selo. Not because they were consecrated to any events from "Holy Writ", but because they were holy to him.

Such places fill our hearts with joy and reverence for the beauty of our native land, the Russian countryside.

You have to climb down a slope to reach Ilyinsky Waters. No matter how much of a hurry you may be in to reach the waterside, you cannot help stopping several times on the way down to glance at the vast expanses on the other side of the river. I have seen many broad vistas in different parts of the world, but the view over Ilyinsky Waters is something which I never expect to find anywhere else.

This spot with all its charm and the unassuming beauty of the common field flowers fills you with a sense of profound peace and the strange thought that if you have to die, let it be here in this patch of mild sunlight among the tall grass. The flowers and herbs—chicory, clover, forget-me-nots and meadowsweet—seem to welcome you, passers-by, with a warm smile, nodding under the weight of heavy bees that keep settling on them, anxiously sucking in the thin fragrant honey.

But the main attraction of these spots lay not in their herbs and flowers, or in their stout elms and rustling broom. It lay in the magnificent view that opened up, tier upon tier, before one's eyes. Each tier, I counted six of them in all, had its particular blend of colour, light and air, as an artist might put it. It was as if a magician had taken all the colours of Central Russia and set them out in a broad panorama shimmering in the warm air.

Dry meadowland, *sukhodol*, in a riot of flowers and greenery lay in the foreground. Here and there in the thick grass sorrel rose up in long thin torches, the colour of deep red wine. Closer to the river were water meadows

overgrown with pale pink meadowsweet. It was already fading and sending up swirls of dry petals over the quiet dark patches of still water.

The second tier was made up of ancient willow and broom bathed in intense heat and resembling clouds of greyish green mist. The leaves hung lethargically until the odd breeze blowing up from nowhere turned their undersides to the sun. And then the whole riverside kingdom of willow and broom became a seething torrent of foliage.

There were many rocky shallows in the river. The water streamed over the stony bed with a glinting murmur, sending out concentric ripples of river freshness.

Forest stretched up to the high horizon in the third tier. At this distance they seemed completely impenetrable and resembled mounds of fresh grass piled up by giants. By looking carefully at the shadows and different shades of colour you could make out where the cuttings, tracks and the big dell were. The dell naturally concealed an enchanted lake with dark olive-green water.

Kites wheeled persistently over the trees. And the day sweltered in expectation of a storm.

Here and there the forest gave way to fields of waving rye, buckwheat and corn. They lay like patchwork quilts stretching out smoothly to the very ends of the earth and fading into the haze—that constant companion of remote expanses.

Through the haze like copper shone fields of grain. It had ripened and a dry rustle, the endless whisper of the ears, rippled constantly from one vast stretch to the next like the majestic music of harvest.

Beyond the fields nestled hundreds of small villages stretching right up to our western border. You could almost smell newly baked rye-bread, that enchanting, age-old smell of Russian villages. A dove-grey haze hung over the last tier, stretching above the horizon low over the earth. Something would flare up in it, like thin slivers of mica bursting into flame and dying away. The haze glinted and trembled with these slivers and in the sky above, blanched with the intense heat, solemn swan-like clouds sailed in a shining procession.

One summer I lived in the steppe beyond Voronezh. I

spent all the day in an overgrown lime park or a windmill on a dry hillock. The mill was surrounded by coarse violet immortelle. Half of its plank roof had been torn away by blast at the time of the German advance on Voronezh. You could see the sky through this opening. I used to lie on the warm clay floor of the mill reading novels by Ertel or simply looking up at the sky through the hole in the roof, where I could see bank upon bank of billowing white cloud trail past slowly northwards.

The clouds cast their gleaming light down to earth and it crept over my face, making me close my eyes to protect them from the brightness. I rubbed some thyme flowers between my fingers and savoured their dry, healthy, southern fragrance. Then I had the strange feeling that the sea was just beyond the windmill and that the aroma of thyme was coming from its smooth sands, not from the open steppe.

Sometimes I would doze off by the millstones of pink sandstone and they would carry me back to the days of Ancient Greece.

A few years later I saw the famous head of the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti made of the same stone and was astonished at the feminine grace expressed with such crude material. The brilliant sculptor had turned the stone into the beautiful head of a vibrant, gentle young woman and presented it to future generations, to us his distant descendants, as tireless as he in our search for eternal beauty.

Two years later in Provence I saw the famous windmill of the French writer Alphonse Daudet where he actually lived for a time.

Life in a windmill smelling of flour and old herbs must have been quite delightful. Particularly in our Voronezh windmill, since Alphonse Daudet lived in a stone mill, not a wooden one full of the delicious scent of resin, bread and convolvulus, full of fresh steppe breezes, the radiance of the clouds, the trilling of the larks and the twittering of small birds—yellow buntings or kinglets.

Unfortunately Ilyinsky Waters had neither a windmill nor a watermill. That was a great pity because nothing suits the Russian countryside as well as these mills. Just as a colourful silk shawl on a Russian peasant girl makes her

eyes darker, her lips brighter and her voice intimate and gentle.

In the far distance between the dim waves of oats and rye stood a knotted elm, its dark leaves murmuring from the gusts of wind. I had the feeling that the elm was not simply standing amid these hot fields, but that it was guarding some secret as ancient as the human skull washed up by a heavy downpour in the neighbouring gully. The skull was a dark brown. It had been cleft from forehead to crown by the stroke of a sword and must have been lying in the ground since the time of the Mongol-Tatar invasion. And it must have heard the calling of the wood sprites, the foxes yelping at the blood-red setting sun and the wheels of Scythian chariots creaking slowly over the steppe.

As well as going to the mill I often spent a lot of time sitting in the shade of this elm-tree. Patches of shy short-stemmed clover were growing on the border between the fields. An angry old bumble-bee made a threatening dive at me in an effort to banish man from its unfrequented realm. I sat in the shade of the elm, lazily picking flowers and grasses with a deep affection welling up inside me for each blade and petal. I was thinking of my silent friends, all these trusting stems and blades, and of the joy and peace of mind which I got from seeing them each day and living with them in this quiet steppe under the open sky.

...You could see a green wall across Ilyinsky Waters. It was the forest on the right bank of the Oka and beyond it nestled the Bogimovo estate with its old park and terraced manor house with Venetian windows. Chekhov once spent the summer here and wrote *Sakhalin Island* and *The House with the Mansard*, that incredibly sad love-story about the sweet young girl Missie. Missie left these parts never to return, but Chekhov's sadness remained. It dwells in the dampish avenues and the empty rooms of the large house where moths sleep on the dusty window-panes. Touch a moth and you will find that it is dead.

The pond is covered with an enormous green carpet of

duckweed. Carp champ away quietly at the waterweed turning first one side of dark liquid gold and then the other to the sun. These carp are the descendants of those for which Chekhov used to fish here.

But Chekhov is no more. I was twelve the year he died and remember how my father's shoulders hunched and his head shook when he learnt of Chekhov's death. And how he turned abruptly and went off to grieve over this irreparable, hopeless loss in private. None of the Russian writers, apart from Pushkin and Tolstoy, were mourned as deeply as Chekhov, for he was not only a great writer but a person whom we admired and loved. He knew the way to human dignity and happiness and mapped it out for us.

It is difficult to say how habits grow up, particularly unexpected ones. Every time I was about to set off on a long journey I always went to take a last look at Ilyinsky Waters. I simply could not leave without saying good-bye to the Waters, the white willow and the rolling Russian plains. I used to say to myself: "You'll suddenly remember this thistle when you are flying over the Mediterranean. If you get there, that is. And you'll think of that last blushing ray of sun lost in the vast heavens when you are somewhere near Paris. If you get there too, that is."

And I did too. There I was flying over the Tyrrhenian Sea. Through the small round window I saw the yellow outline of an island looking like a thistle appear in the fathomless blue depths. It was Corsica. Later I learned that seen from above islands take on fantastic shapes just like cumulus cloud. These shapes are the product of our imagination, of course.

The jagged coast of Corsica lashed by the centuries and baked by the intense heat, its castles protecting the islands like spiky thorns, patches of bright red shrubs, a torrent of deep blue Mediterranean light bursting through the invisible weir of the heavens and cascading in all its might onto the island—all this could not distract my thoughts from a small damp hollow on Ilyinsky Waters smelling of hemlock with a solitary thistle that grew up to your

head—impregnable, bristling with prickles, its sharp elbow-pieces and visor.

On the western shore of the island was a small town resembling a handful of carelessly scattered dice. It emerged from under the wing of the plane like a honeycomb. This was Napoleon's birthplace, Ajaccio.

"All conquerors are nut cases," said my neighbour, a fat jovial Italian in sun-glasses, glancing down at Ajaccio. "How on earth a person who was born and grew up in such beauty could become a mass murderer is completely beyond me! "

He opened his newspaper noisily, looked at a page and then threw it aside, announcing to all and sundry:

"Ho ho. De Gaulle's not a bad Catholic, it seems."

Rome was shining in the distance with the bright reflection of the sun on the glass of new, multistorey blocks. The intercom at the airport kept repeating agitatedly that Signor Parelli's car was waiting for him at the main entrance.

And I suddenly felt an intense yearning to be back in my simple log-house, on the Oka, on Ilyinsky Waters where the willows, the misty Russian sunsets on the plains and my friends were waiting faithfully for me.

As for the blushing ray of sun I saw that as well a few days later in the small town of Ermenonville near Paris where Jean Jacques Rousseau spent the last few weeks of his life on an old estate. The concierge opened the iron gate for us, took our entrance fee in silence and indicated with an angry wave of the hand where we should begin our look round the park. Then in an equally angry manner she told us that the house was closed and all we could do was look at the park.

The park was deserted. We did not meet a single soul in it. If the ghost of Rousseau had been in the park, no one would have prevented us from communing with it. Yellow plane leaves rustled beneath our feet. They covered the surface of the misty ponds as well as all the ground. I had never seen such enormous plane-trees. Their leaves were falling fast baring the gigantic tree-tops. The trees seemed

to have been cast in light bronze by some great sculptor, a Benvenuto Cellini. Their tops were enveloped in mist and this gave them a somewhat eerie appearance.

There was a grey silence all round. The park was immersed in gloom. Now and then transparent icy drops would fall off the branches onto our hands. The yellow, spreading leaves fell constantly, their light rustle following on our heels.

A slate grey sky stretched overhead, but it was a light, radiant Paris grey all the same. Rousseau's tomb stood gleaming on an island in the middle of a pond. The only way of reaching it was by boat and there were no boats on the pond. Nor were Rousseau's remains on the island. They had been removed to the Pantheon a long time ago.

Then the rosy light of the sun began to break through the shrouds of mist and the plane-trees suddenly seemed to come to life, transformed into burnished copper. I remembered a similar rosy evening on Ilyinsky Waters and was suddenly overwhelmed by the familiar feeling of homesickness, longing for our vast country, for the sunsets, the plantain and the gentle rustle of the fallen leaves.

Beautiful France was magnificent, of course, but indifferent to us. We were homesick for Russia. That day I began to long to get home to the Oka where everything was so familiar, so dear and so natural. My heart sank at the very thought that my return home might be delayed for some reason even by a few days.

I fell in love with France long ago, intellectually at first and then really seriously. But I could not sacrifice even such a small thing as a saffron beam of morning sunlight on the log wall of an old *izba* for her. You could follow the movement of the sunbeam over the wall, listen to the saucy shrieks of the village cocks and the old familiar words would spring to your lips:

*The cocks are crowing over Holy Russia—
Over Holy Russia it will soon be day...*

Now and then the leaves drifted down from the plane-trees. The gardens of Ermenonville, those sacred gardens

imbued with the memory of Rousseau, nestled in the darkling autumn day as short and melancholy as a Russian autumn. Something very close and dear beckoned to us in the silent mist above the pond and the hush of approaching night.

Yes! A man's country is his very life-blood. He cannot live without it.

1964

Translated by Kathleen Cook

REQUEST TO READERS

Raduga Publishers would be gald to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

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